

# Do all CEOs feel like this?



**Potential implications for corporate governance,  
decision making, strategy creation  
and  
mental health**

A survey of the emotions felt by 50 CEOs.

Spring 2021

## Contents

<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>	4
<u>AUTHOR'S FOREWORD</u>	7
<u>WHY DOES THIS MATTER?</u>	9
<u>EMOTIONS IN CONTEXT</u>	11
<u>MY (FLAWED) APPROACH</u>	12
<u>PROUD, PASSIONATE, OPTIMISTIC, INSPIRED, INTERESTED, ENERGISED, ENGAGED AND COURAGEOUS</u>	16
<u>EMPATHETIC, SYMPATHETIC, RESPECTFUL AND KIND</u>	21
<u>ANGRY, DISSATISFIED, FRUSTRATED AND DISSAPPOINTED</u>	24
<u>RELUCTANT, REGRETFUL AND SAD</u>	28
<u>WORRIED AND DOUBTFUL</u>	30
<u>BORED</u>	32
<u>COMPETITIVE</u>	33
<u>TRUSTING</u>	34
<u>HAPPY, LAUGHING AND RELAXED</u>	35
<u>LONELY, INSECURE, UNLOVED AND TIRED</u>	37
<u>THE EMOTIONAL CEO - A SUMMARY</u>	41
<u>THE ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF CEO EMOTIONS</u>	44
<u>THE IMPACT ON THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF THE CEO</u>	49
<u>HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT CEOS AND BOARDS?</u>	52
<u>APPENDIX - A LIST OF EMOTIONS</u>	54

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR.



Andrew Manning has spent over 25 years as a leader in the service sector, working for large corporates, partnerships, and SMEs. He has served as Chair, CEO, COO and Divisional Managing Director at several market-leading companies.

He is an alumnus of Harvard Business School, having completed its Advanced Management Program in 2012.

He has an MBA, passed with Distinction, from Bristol Business School.

He currently has a portfolio career, mixing executive, non- executive and advisory roles. More details can be found at <http://www.knowprogress.co.uk>

Andrew can be contacted at:

[Andrew.manning@knowprogress.co.uk](mailto:Andrew.manning@knowprogress.co.uk) or on 07765 896781.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.

***Emotion: “a strong feeling deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others”***

This study was sparked by the observation made to me by a very experienced leader that it can be lonely being a CEO. Having been in such roles myself for over 15 years, that struck a chord. It made me reflect on the range of emotions that I have felt whilst fulfilling such a role and that I have had no reference point for whether those emotions were “normal” or specific to me.

More importantly, I began to wonder what the consequences of such emotions might be for ***organisational performance*** and ***personal performance, corporate governance*** and for the ***physical health*** and ***mental health*** of CEOs.

Whilst there is an abundance of literature around leadership, I could find little in the public domain about emotions felt by CEOs. I therefore decided to instigate some research, the findings of which are set out below.

The purpose of this limited study was not to find “answers”, but to identify some potential trends and to raise some questions to encourage wider debate and research.

What I have found appears to have implications for

- **decision-making;**
- **creativity and generation of strategy;**
- **corporate governance;**
- **team building; and**
- **sustaining the mental health of CEOs, and those around them.**

At the most basic level it will provide some benchmarks for CEOs to consider their own emotions.

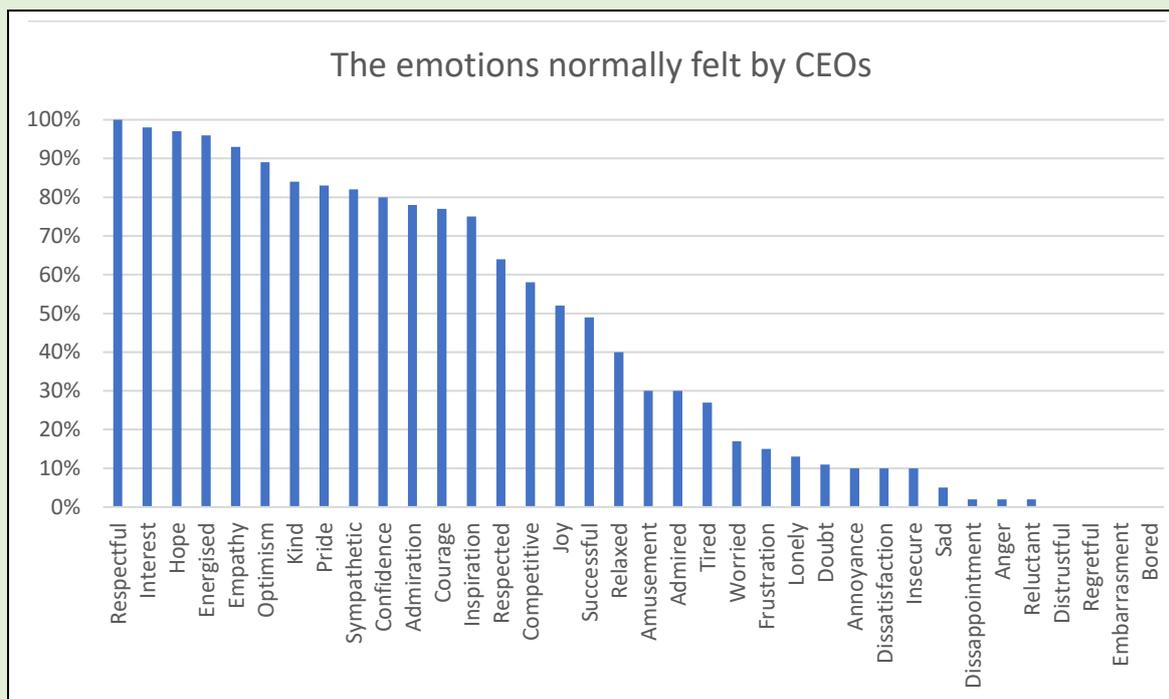
The key findings are that the emotions normally felt by the CEOs in the survey are those which psychologists term

***“high arousal positive emotions”***

These include; having high levels of ***interest*** (in a subject), ***hope*** and ***optimism***, feeling ***energised***, ***pride***, ***empathy***, and ***respectfulness*** towards others.

The respondents more rarely experience low arousal positive emotions such as being ***calm***, ***relaxed***, and ***peaceful***, or low arousal negative emotions such as ***sadness*** or ***boredom***. They occasionally experience high arousal negative emotions, such as being ***annoyed*** or ***angry***.

The emotions normally felt by CEOs are ranked in terms of frequency felt in the graph below.



### What might this mean?

These findings have implications for decision making, strategic thinking, and corporate governance. They also have potentially profound implications for the sustainable mental health and performance of CEOs.

- Some studies suggest that high arousal positive emotions can lead to a **short-term focus for decisions** and a **greater appetite for risk**.
- Other studies suggest that **people can be more creative when they are experiencing low arousal positive emotions**. This may have implications for when CEOs can best perform strategic thinking and consider innovation.

The apparent prevalence of high arousal positive emotion for CEO's therefore raises interesting questions about obtaining a balance on a Board and within Executive teams.

These emotions also appear designed to trigger a "fight, freeze or flight" response from those experiencing them- which **may explain why CEOs can be combative**.

Whilst high arousal negative emotions, such as anger, may be only rarely felt by CEOs, **are these high arousal negative emotions a catalyst for positive organisational change or for potential disruption?** When and why do these high arousal negative emotions occur? And

- **What does it mean if negative emotions are being felt more often than "normal" by a CEO?**

Is that a warning sign that the CEO is becoming tired and less effective, or bored and looking for a new challenge? Might this create relationship risks with the Board and Executive team?

There was some evidence of a **CEO emotional cycle**, with some **becoming less inspired and confident, and more frustrated, annoyed, and dissatisfied in years 3 to 5 of their tenure, before becoming more positive and less negative in following years.**

Whilst CEOs normally have high arousal positive emotions about their organisation and its prospects and about other people, **CEOs are much less positive about themselves.** A significant percentage of CEOs do not feel admired or successful, nor happy and relaxed. **Most feel insecure and lonely at times.**

CEOs appear to be in a state of **Constant Emotional Overdrive.**

Such a situation is not sustainable in the long term as it taxes the individual's mental and physical well-being. It appears that **CEO stress may reflect a "stressed" (unbalanced) emotional system, lacking the calming effect of low arousal positive emotions, rather than the difficulties of the situation the CEO and their organisation may be facing-** CEO's are positive, "can do" people- both mentally and physically.

The learning point for CEOs, with respect to mental health, is do not think about "stress" but think about a "stressed system". **CEOs should try to avoid overstressing their system with a surfeit of high arousal positivity.**

It is not all "bad news" however in terms of long-term mental health implications- particularly if this balance can be achieved.

Martin Seligman, the leading "positive psychologist", has a theory of "Well Being" which suggests that the positive emotions, level of engagement, and accomplishment typically achieved by CEOs, particularly if they are operating in an environment where they have strong relationships and feel there is meaning and purpose to their organisation and role, should **lead to a strong sense of well-being.**

So, plenty of food for thought and surely more research is required?

## AUTHOR'S FOREWORD.

### The CEO as amateur psychologist

Every CEO must be, to some degree, an amateur psychologist to understand what makes their colleagues, customers, and other stake-holders tick. In this short book, I have taken my attempts a stage further and tried to apply some basic psychological models to my research into the emotions typically felt by fellow CEOs.

I have written this study as an interested, experienced CEO, not as a qualified statistician or psychologist. Accordingly, I accept my application may be flawed, and that the sample size may be restricted and self-selecting, as discussed later.

### What is an emotion?

The Oxford Dictionary states that an emotion is

*“a strong feeling deriving from one's circumstances, mood, or relationships with others”.*

Wikipedia states

*“Emotions are biological states associated with the nervous system brought on by neurophysiological changes variously associated with thoughts, feelings, behavioural responses, and a degree of pleasure or displeasure. **There is currently no scientific consensus on a definition\***”*

\*my embolden

### The objective of this study

The purpose of the study is not to find “answers”, but merely to identify some questions to

- encourage wider debate and research
- potentially generate enhanced CEO and organisational performance
- assist enhanced corporate governance and
- support the mental health of CEOs.

At the most basic level hopefully it will provide some benchmarks for CEOs to consider their own emotions.

### Why undertake the study?

Having returned from my meeting with my fellow CEO, when we had discussed feeling lonely, I did some initial research on the internet into emotions commonly felt by CEOs- but could find nothing directly relating to the subject matter. I did some more online research in the library of a leading UK business school, and again could not readily find material on the subject matter. I therefore decided to do some research myself. It is quite possible that I did not look hard enough or far enough.

### What have I learned?

My initial findings are set out in this paper. Some of the findings may not be a surprise, some may be. What jumped out at me is that a lot of the extremely positive emotions experienced by CEOs can come at a significant cost if not managed.



The findings also raise some interesting “nature versus nurture” questions- are these the typical emotions of people who become CEOs or the results of becoming a CEO?

What I have also learned is that there appear to be a lot of different models and opinions in psychology so that there may not be a “right” or “wrong” answer anyway!

What also became clear to me is well summarised by Robert Louis Stevenson in his famous book, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde -which of course is an interesting source for some research on CEO emotions!

***“The less I understood of this farrago, the less I was in a position to judge of its importance.”***

And for me, the more I have come to understand it, the more I think it matters.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The emotions normally, and occasionally, felt by an organisation's Chief Executive are extremely important, for a range of reasons, and for a range of people.

### **For the CEO**

Let us start with the CEO themselves.

Whilst there are plenty of "how", "what" and "when" books advising Chief Executives how to be better leaders, what they need to accomplish in their first 100 days, how to manage change, how to produce strategy etc, there appears to be little material available, except perhaps in some arcane areas of academia, suggesting to CEOs how they might feel in such a role. What are "normal" emotions and what are "exceptional" emotions? For example, is it "normal" to feel lonely, proud, or angry?

If there are a "normal" set of emotions for CEOs to experience this begs the following questions:

- Is it "normal" or "occasional" emotions which have most impact and which drive change in the organisation and/or its performance?
- If a CEO starts to feel some less "normal" emotions, what might this mean and what might be the consequences?
- What might be the mental and physical health consequences for the CEO of their "normal" emotions?
- How best to identify and manage the above?

It also matters for the CEO's family-so that they understand what goes with the territory.

### **For good corporate governance**

The role of corporate governance is to direct and control an organisation, typically through a Board of Directors or Trustees. Where the CEO is not the owner or dominant shareholder of the organisation it is also to ensure that power is not concentrated in the hands of a single individual (the CEO) and to ensure that they are accountable to the owners and other stakeholders.

In the UK, under the Companies Act, all statutory Directors of an organisation have the same legal responsibilities and duties, whether they are the CEO or another executive director (e.g., CFO) or non-executive director. To fulfil their legal responsibilities and to manage their risks, the other Directors will want and need to be able to manage the CEO.

Understanding the emotions felt by CEOs and how these impact on behaviours and decisions would therefore appear to form an important element of good corporate governance.

Board members need to understand how to work with, support, encourage or rein-in a CEO, and when or if to give them a break and some time off to recharge. Boards also need to understand what a change in the emotions or behaviours of a CEO might be signalling. They need to understand if there is a natural life cycle of CEO emotions to manage.

Board members need to understand and support the positive mental health of the CEO, both as part of good corporate governance and as part of the organisation's general duty of care to the CEO as an employee, as well as a desire to be a "good" employer.

The CEO needs to understand how their emotions might impact the other members of the Board, and their relationship with the other Directors, and how this can impact the governance of the organisation and the decisions taken by the Board. The CEO needs to support the positive mental health of their Board colleagues.

There is also the question of how to get a good balance on the Board. The potential risk of not enough balance is poor governance and/or poor organisational performance. The potential risk of "total" balance is that the Board effectively neutralises itself.

### **For the executive team**

Similar questions apply to the interaction of the CEO and the executive team. The Board and the CEO need to consider how to build a team that complements and supports the CEO, but also creates balance and restraint where appropriate. It needs to consider how the executive team support the positive mental health of the CEO, and vice versa.

As the CEO's closest colleagues, the executive team are also most likely to be the first to spot changes in the emotions of the CEO and vice versa.

The CEO and executive team also need to consider how their emotions will filter down through the organisation, and the potential impact of such. They need to consider how they can encourage, magnify, and build upon such, or counteract the impact of such, as appropriate.

### **For organisational performance**

It would appear to be of value to understand the impact on organisational performance of the CEO's emotions. Are organisations best or sustainably shaped by being driven by positive or negative emotion? Is change best driven by positive or negative emotion? Do high intensity or low intensity emotions- as explained further below- make the most difference? Is a balance required between the two for sustainability?

### **The changing corporate environment**

It also matters because we have seen a background of a longer term "greying" of corporate life starting to be replaced by the idea of a rehumanising leadership with a "true north" approach of "being yourself".

### **The human CEO**

CEOs are (mostly) human. Humans are emotional beings. A CEOs' emotions would appear to matter.

## EMOTIONS IN CONTEXT.

When considering these results, in addition to potential flaws in the methodology, as covered in the next section, it is important to also remember that emotions do not occur in a vacuum. It might be expected that emotions being felt at any one time by the CEO will reflect a range of factors including the

- CEO's personality;
- Performance and behaviours of their immediate colleagues- the Board and the Executive team- and their personalities;
- Performance and behaviours of the wider organisation;
- Organisation's culture;
- Competitive environment in which the organisation is operating;
- Wider political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legislative environment in which it is operating;
- Organisation's short-term situation- "events";
- Organisation's long-term outlook- "prospects";
- CEO's physical and mental health at that particular time;
- CEO's personal circumstances;
- Issues relating to the CEO's immediate family and friends;

It is also important to ask the question- which I seek to do later in the report- "so what?". That is, what are the consequences, if any, of CEOs or others experiencing these emotions, and does that "so what" depend on when and why these emotions are experienced and how they are expressed?

Emotions need to be considered in terms of the "internal" effect on the CEO- what they feel- and the external manifestation of such in terms of the CEO's behaviours.

Ultimately, arguably what matters most are whether the consequences of these emotions are positive or negative for the CEO, the CEO's family, their work colleagues, and the wider organisation.

## MY (FLAWED) APPROACH.

### A critique of the sample

I am privileged to be connected, via the social media network LinkedIn, to almost one thousand CEOs, ranging from CEOs of large corporates to CEOs of micro businesses, covering both the “for profit” and “not for profit” sectors. These connections seemed a good place to start my research as it is quite a large group.

I am not claiming that this is a representative group, as it is self-selecting- namely those CEOs who have responded to my request to link or those who have asked me to link to them. The reasons for these requests and consent could be multi-fold. Furthermore, those who kindly responded to my questionnaire were also self-selecting from within this large group, and this in turn might reflect that they have a particular interest in the subject matter and thus a degree of bias.

My connections are also predominantly based in the UK, so may not reflect cultural and other environmental nuances in other countries. They may not also reflect cultural or ethnic diversity within the UK.

Whilst only a small percentage of my contacts are CEOs of public limited companies, I believe that to be much less of an issue because most CEOs are not CEOs of public limited companies. By way of example, whilst, according to the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, there were 41,000 publicly listed companies in the world in 2017, in 2014/15, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, there were 1.8m companies that were owner managed in the UK alone.

I requested over 600 of these LinkedIn contacts to complete the survey. I received around 50 responses, which is a response rate of approximately 6%. This may reflect a range of factors, including suspicion of unsolicited links over the internet, a lack of interest in the subject, or concerns about the anonymity of responses, to name just a few. There may also be bias in the groups that did or did not respond.

One potential bias is that those who responded are highly successful CEOs, or very unsuccessful CEOs, or “averagely” successful CEOs. The only guide I have is that in response to the question, “how well was their organisation performing?” I got a mixed response, with some performing better than targeted, some in line with target, and some below. Again, I have no reason to know whether these were appropriate targets or whether they were particularly demanding or not.

### A description of the sample

There was an equal split of male and female respondents. 75% were from SMEs, as defined by the UK government. Approximately 99.9% of organisations in the UK fall into that category according to the UK Government in January 2020.

90% of the respondents were aged above 44.

80% had been CEOs for more than 3 years. There was a spread between new and long serving CEOs (length of tenure in a CEO role rather than in the role in a particular organisation).

Approximately 60% of the respondents were from the for-profit sector. This is the dominant sector in the UK in terms of employees (approx. 80% of all employees) and number of organisations (over 5.5m businesses), and hence will have more CEOs, or equivalent, than the Public and Third sectors.

### **Statistical validity**

In view of the small size of the sample, and, more particularly, the exceedingly small size of the sub-samples- (for example, female CEOs of small not for profit organisations), I have restricted the commentary to the total sample.

### **The method**

Having identified a group of CEOs to survey, I needed to decide what to ask them.

My initial thought was to ask them to identify, by free text, the 5 or 10 emotions that they felt most often. I quickly realised that such an approach would give rise to at least two major challenges- namely people using different words for the same emotion, making it difficult to group them, and people not considering their full range of emotions whilst completing a short survey. Use a “standard” list of emotions I thought!

However, one of my first findings was that, as far as I can ascertain, the psychology profession has no single, agreed, exhaustively defined list of human emotions. There does however appear to be agreement that there are a considerable range of emotions which can be grouped into closely related types.

For the purposes of the survey, I therefore picked a long list of emotions, covering the full emotional spectrum, from readily available sources. This list is set out in the Appendix.

My question for each emotion in the list was simply “how often do you feel this emotion?”, and provided a range of possible answers as follows:

- “Always”
- “Usually”
- “Sometimes”
- “Occasionally”
- “Never”

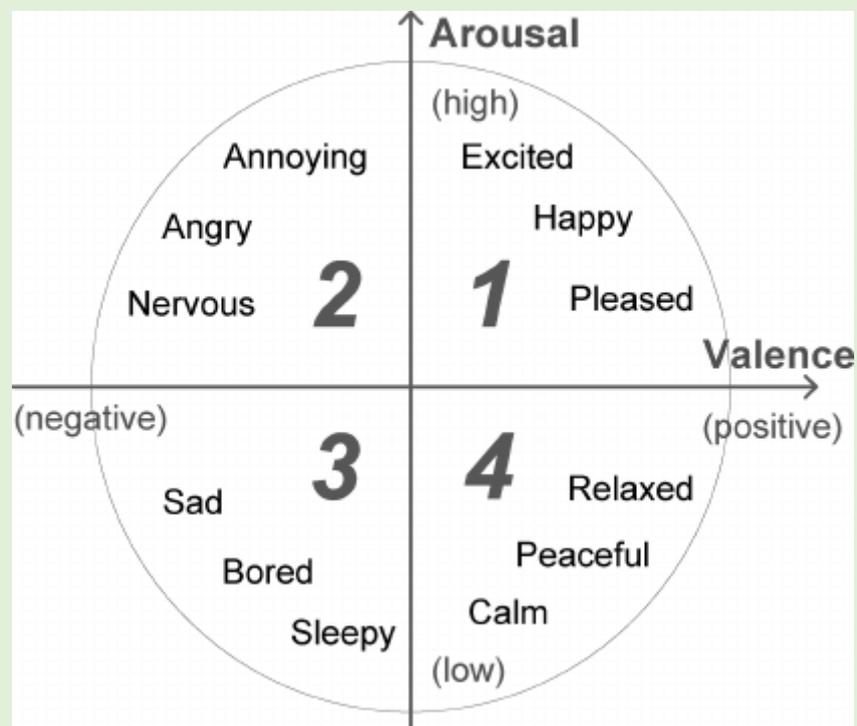
These are categories taken from the menu within the survey tool I used- which was SurveyMonkey. I have then taken those emotions felt “always” or “usually” as being the “normal” emotions felt by the respondent.

No doubt this approach too is open to challenge.

I also wondered how to categorise the responses to try and identify any common threads. I decided that as a non-expert, it was best to keep it simple.

It appears that emotions are commonly categorised as emotions with positive valence, (“positive emotions”) and those with negative valence (“negative emotions”). Positive emotions are classified based on the intrinsic attractiveness of the emotion. Negative emotions that have intrinsic aversiveness.

In some psychological models, emotions also appear to be categorised in terms of a level of arousal, from low to high. Arousal refers to the level of mental, or physical, activity associated with the emotion. An example of high arousal emotion is “excitement”, and a low arousal emotion would be “calm”. This is illustrated in the model below.



*Taken from researchgate.net: The 2D valence-arousal emotion space, Russell, 1980.*

This categorisation means that I did not feel the need to ask a supplementary question for each emotion asking how intensely they felt the emotion. Again, this may be open to challenge.

Another potential omission was not inquiring which emotions were felt simultaneously, or in rapid succession, or in a cycle such as the “grief curve”. Or in what situations this was felt and the consequences.

What I have also tried to do is to group emotions into collections that we might recognise as lay people rather than psychologists- which again might be wrong. These groupings form the chapter heading.

### Summary

I am not a statistician, and no doubt these statistics are open to professional challenge concerning validity, significance, representativeness and so on. Equally I am not a trained psychologist so recognise the potential challenges from that direction.

However, as stated earlier, I hope my research might spark more in-depth research and analysis to scrutinise, validate, disprove, amend, or refine my broad findings, rather than simply attract the brickbats of statisticians and psychologists. I accept that there are lots of things wrong with the

sample and method- but does this matter if it throws up some key questions and points, and stimulates further thinking and debate?

One further thought. These are the answers of CEOs. Would the answers be different from Chairs, other NEDS, COOs, and CFOs, or indeed from the “average person” in the street? In this simple study, however, I am not trying to ascertain whether CEOs are different or not, just what CEOs feel.

So, there may be issues with the sample and the answers. But it is a start.

## PROUD, PASSIONATE, OPTIMISTIC, INSPIRED, INTERESTED, ENERGISED, ENGAGED AND COURAGEOUS.

Many individuals or groups, if they think of CEOs at all, will think of them as proud, passionate, confident people who are deeply engaged with their organisation. Many, if not all, CEOs will consider themselves as being such people, or want themselves to be perceived as such. Afterall, who wants to follow a disengaged, passionless, leader who does not appear to be proud of the organisation which they are leading?

### ARE CEOs POSITIVELY EMOTIONALLY AROUSED INDIVIDUALS?

My basic research indicated that it appears that there are several positive emotions related to pride, passion, optimism, and engagement. These also appear to be classified as “high arousal” emotions, involving a lot of mental activity, and sometimes associated physical activity.

The survey asked CEOs about how often they felt the following group of emotions

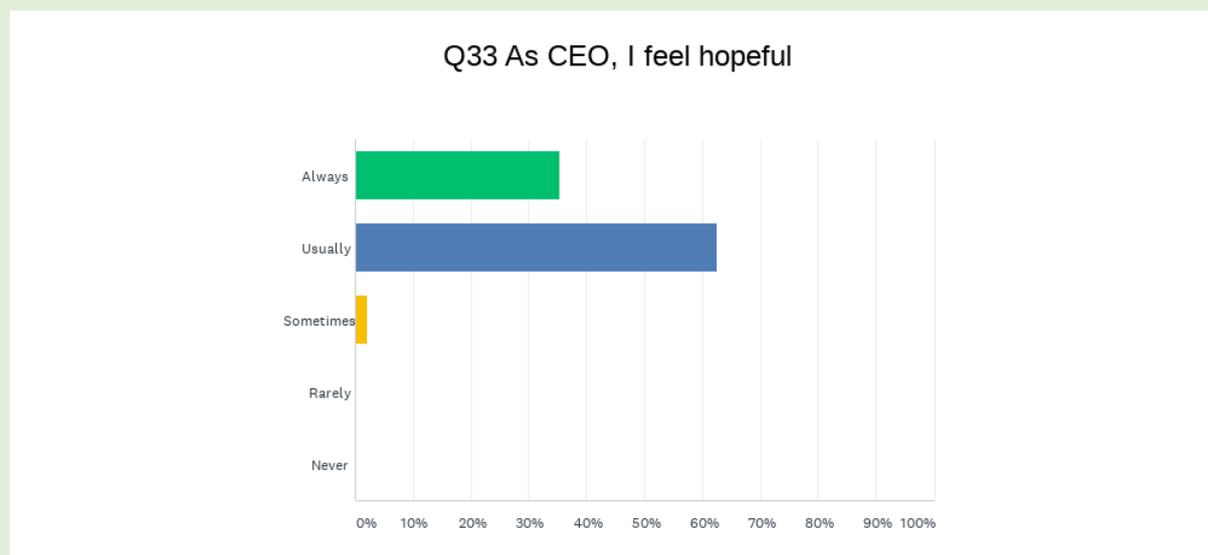
- Hope
- Inspiration
- Optimism
- Energised
- Confidence
- Courage
- Interest/fascination
- Pride

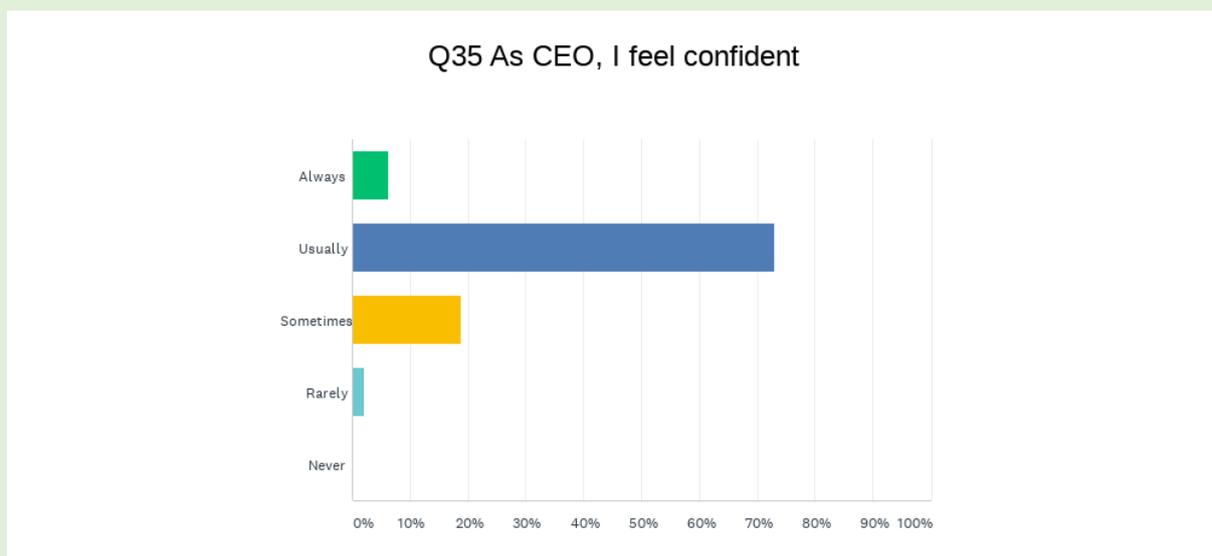
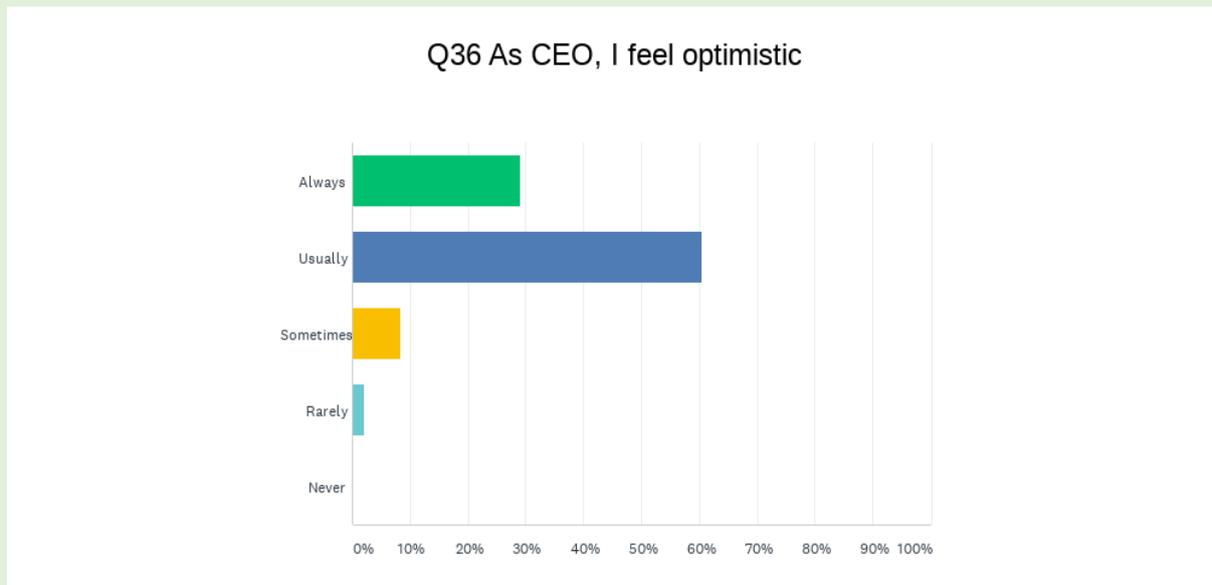
### **CEOs are hopeful, optimistic, and confident**

It may not be surprising to find that the surveyed group indicated that they feel

- **Hopeful** for more than 95% of the time;
- **Optimistic** for 90% of the time;
- **Confident** for 80% of the time;

It is also worth noting that they made this response during a period of great uncertainty due to COVID 19.

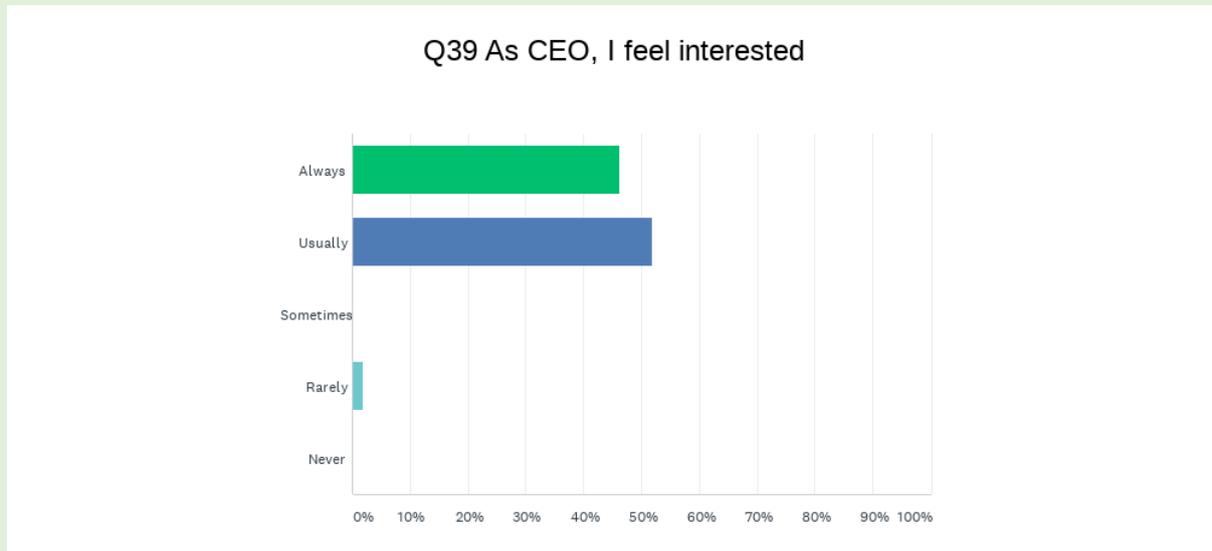




### How interested are CEOs?

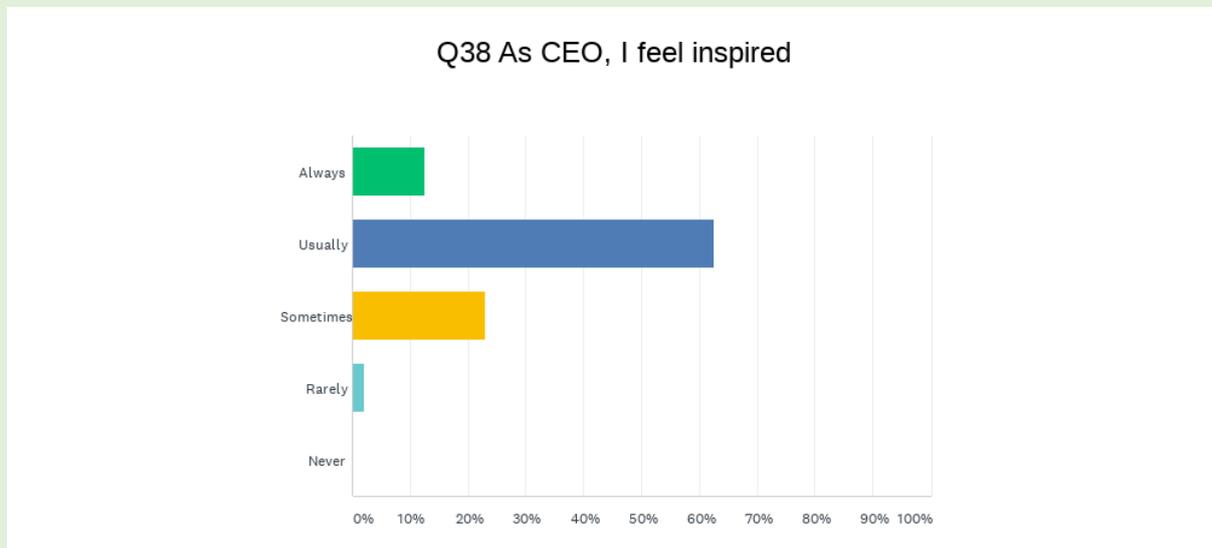
It would appear, therefore, that it might be expected that the typical CEO has a positive view on the future. But are they interested in their role and the organisation?

The survey also suggests that CEOs of all sizes of organisation “usually” or “always” feel **interested**.



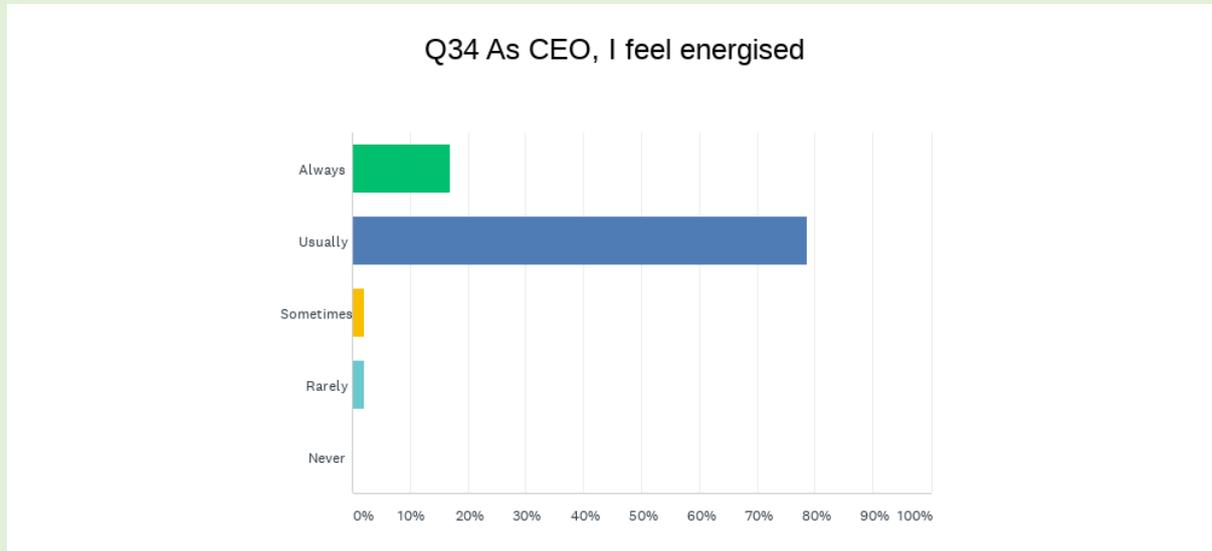
#### How inspired do CEOs feel?

The survey suggests that CEOs typically feel **inspired**. 75% “usually” or “always” feel inspired.



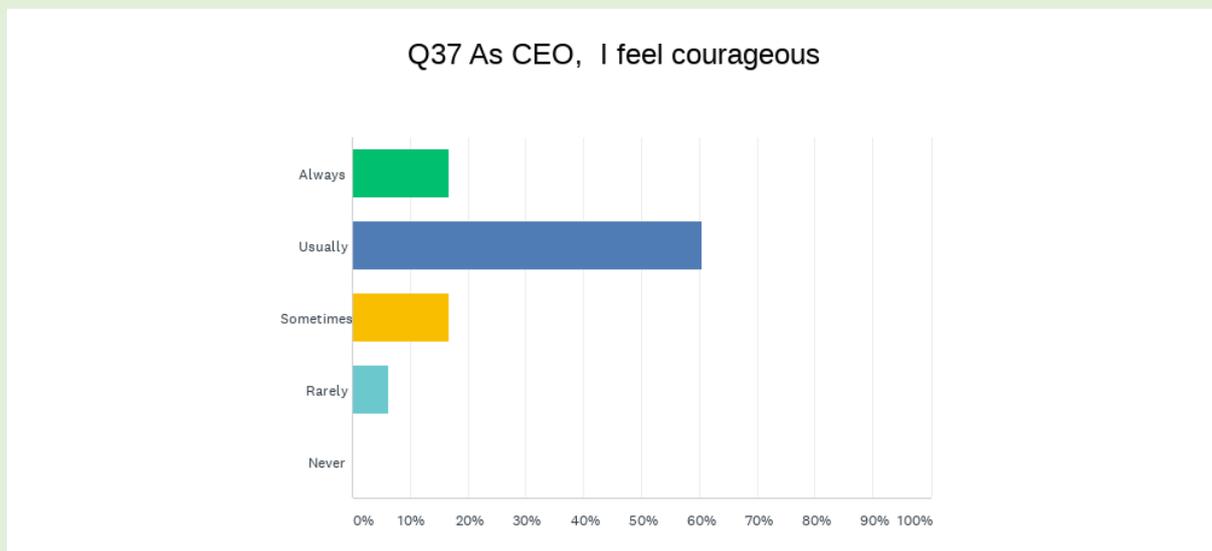
### How energised are CEOs?

Whatever their ages, all the CEOs feel **energised** “usually” or “always”.



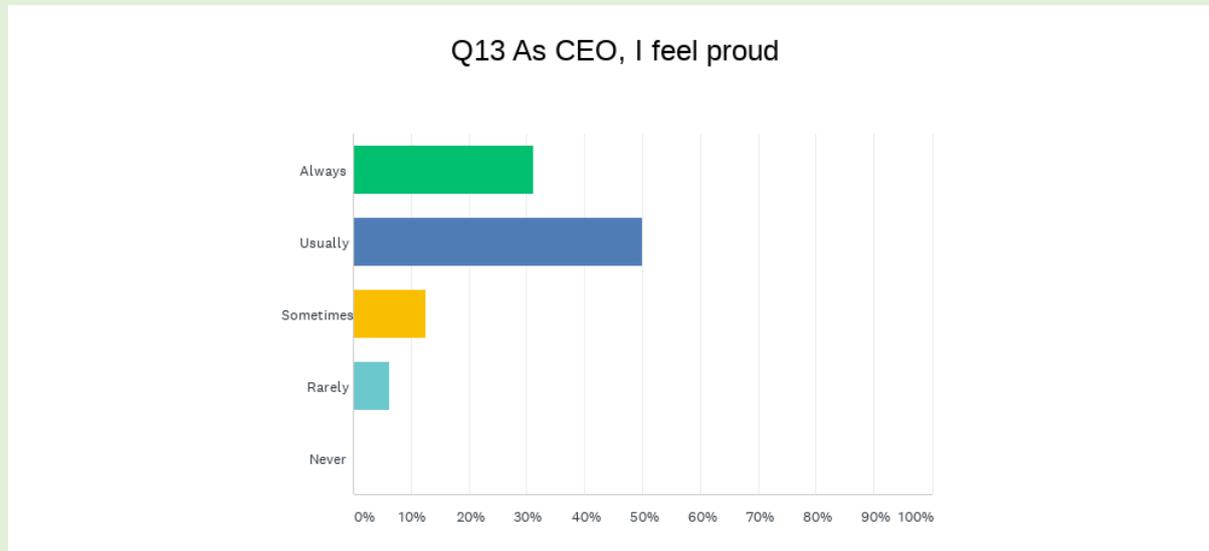
### How courageous do CEOs feel?

It also appears that CEOs normally feel **courageous**. 77% “usually” or “always” feel courageous.



## How proud do CEOs feel?

83% of CEOs always or usually feel **proud**.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### The overall picture

The stereotyped view of the CEO, as set out at the beginning of this chapter, based on this survey, would appear to be grounded in truth.

Chief Executives typically “always” or “usually” feel powerful positive emotions. They feel

- **Hopeful**
- **Optimistic**
- **Confident**
- **Interested**
- **Inspired**
- **Energised**
- **Courageous**
- **Proud.**

A CEO not feeling these positive, high arousal emotions for most of the time, based on this sample, would therefore be unusual- and the causes and implications of such, should it arise, would therefore appear worthy of careful consideration by the CEO and the Board.

These findings, whilst perhaps not surprising, beg the following questions

- What are the consequences for the CEO of these emotions?
- What are the consequences for their colleagues on the Board and in the senior management team?
- What are the consequences for the organisation?

These will be considered later- relating to decision making and mental health.

## EMPATHETIC, SYMPATHETIC, RESPECTFUL AND KIND.

How often do you hear CEOs as a group being described as empathetic, sympathetic, respectful, or kind? These may not be emotions that readily spring to mind when discussing CEOs, or if they do, are related to market sectors, such as not for profit.

However, whatever the perception of CEOs by their Board and management colleagues, their employees, their shareholders or owners, other stakeholders, or the media, are these emotions normally felt by CEOs?

This section considers the following five positive emotions

- Empathy
- Sympathy
- Respect
- Kindness
- Admiration

These are all emotions which focus on other people- whereas the previous group of emotions tend to be more focused on the organisation and the CEO.

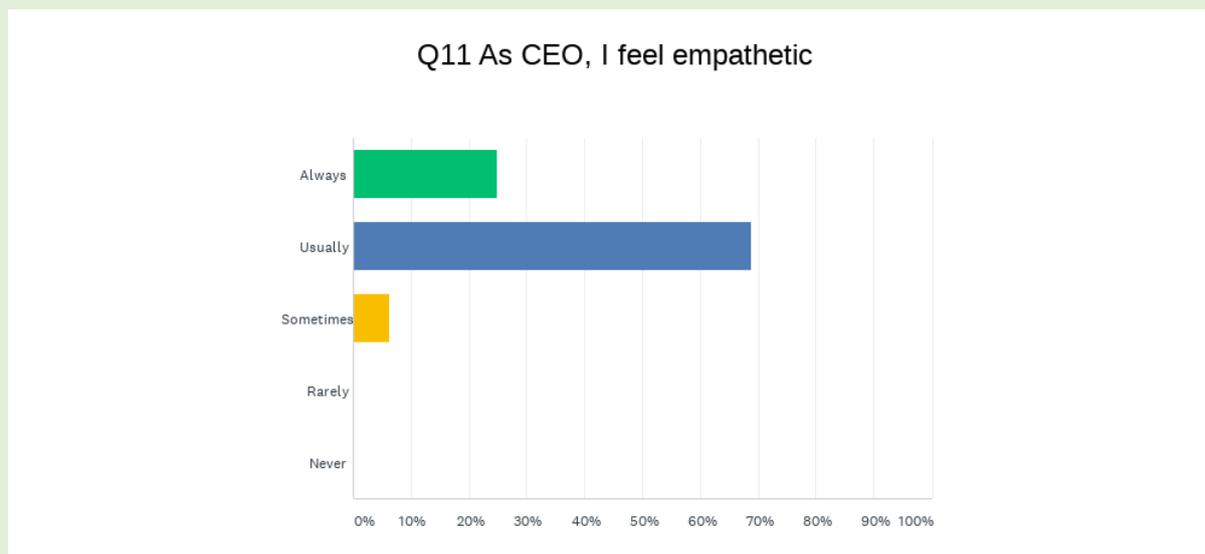
A good way to remember the difference is as follows

*Empathy is walking a mile in someone else's shoes. Sympathy is being sorry their feet hurt. Admiration is being amazed they can walk that far with sore feet and respecting them for managing it. Being kind is buying them a new pair of shoes.* Source: ANON.

### Empathy

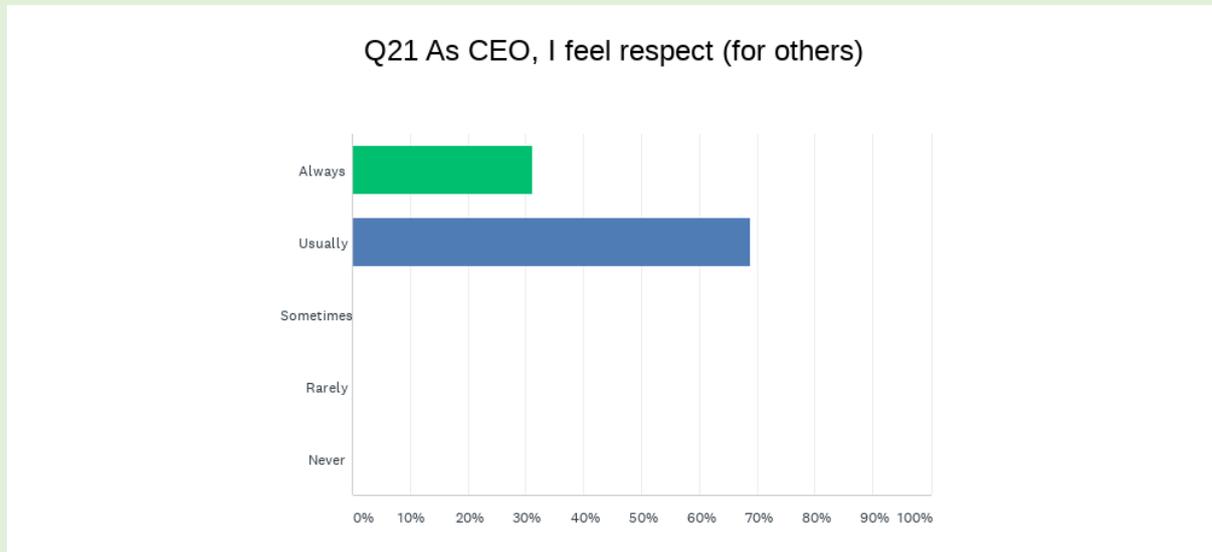
The core definition of a leader is someone who has followers. For people to follow someone, other than by coercion, is that the leader understands the followers, or the followers perceive that they do. To understand someone you need **empathy**- that is the ability to put yourself in another's position.

93% of the CEOs surveyed claim to feel empathetic "always" (25%) or "usually" (68%).



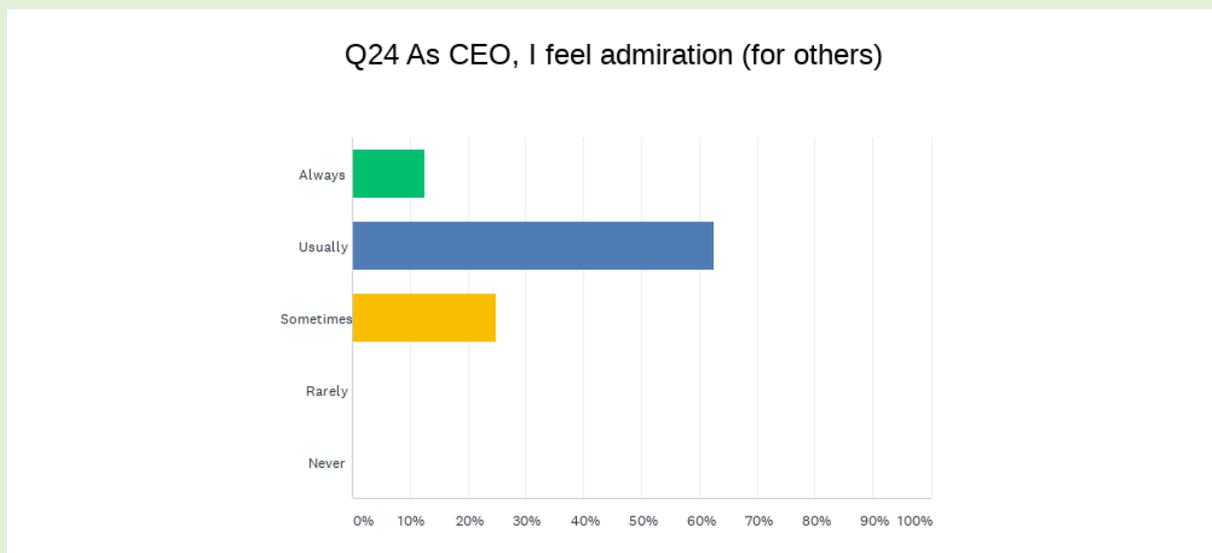
## Respect

The survey also indicates a high level of CEO **respect** for others. This is an emotion “always” (33%) or “usually” (67%) felt.



## Admiration

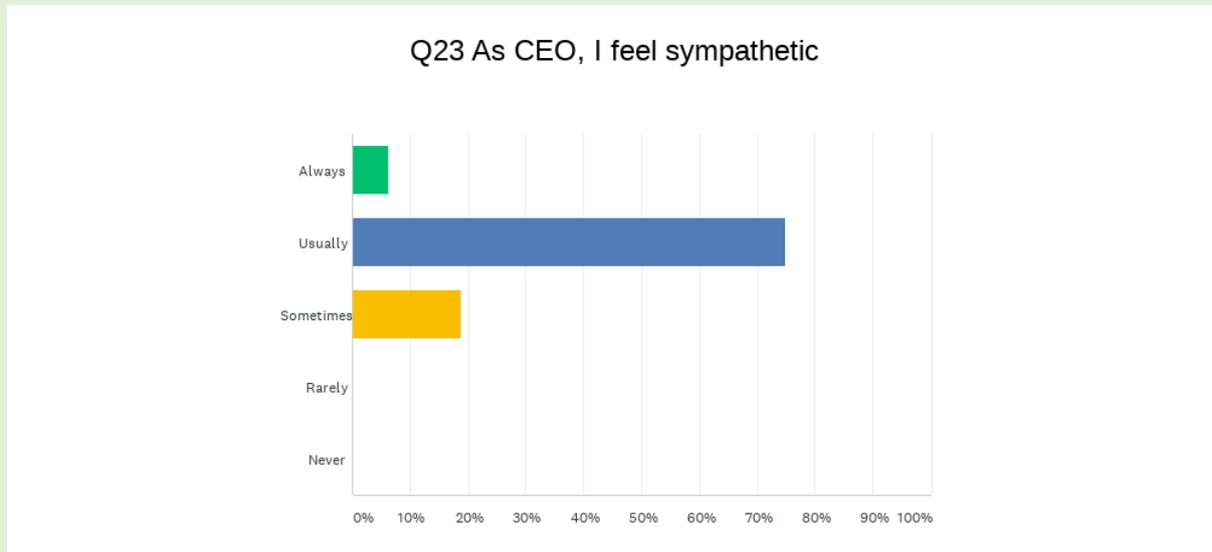
CEOs “always” (13%) or “usually” (64%) feel admiration for others. It is an emotion normally felt by over 70% of CEOs.



So all CEOs normally feel empathetic and respectful, and a huge percentage normally feel admiration for others. But does this translate into feeling sympathetic and kind?

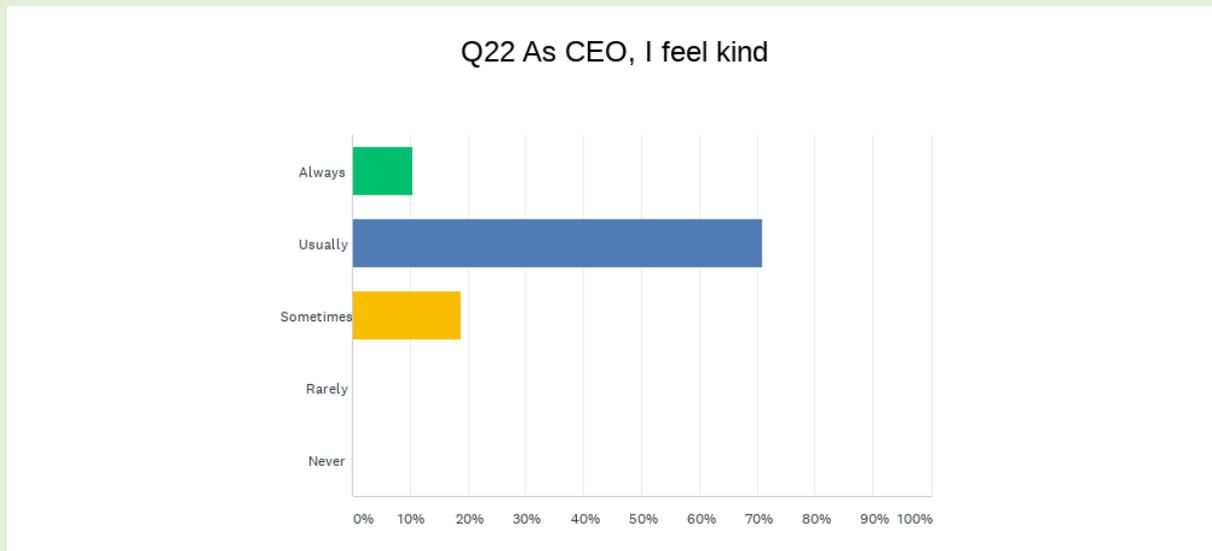
## Sympathy

82% of CEOs “always” (7%) or “usually” (75%) feel **sympathetic**. None “never” or “rarely” feel sympathetic.



## Kind

84% of CEOs “always” or “usually” feel **kind**.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The survey suggests that CEOs normally experience positive emotions towards other people.

## ANGRY, DISSATISFIED, FRUSTRATED, AND DISSAPPOINTED.

The survey has shown that CEOs often experience high arousal positive emotions around the organisation, its future, and themselves, and positive emotions towards others. But is there an alternative, or complementary face to this? Are CEO's driven by powerful negative emotions? How often is organisational performance driven by the CEO's dissatisfaction, or perceived dissatisfaction with current results or organisational culture, resources, systems, and processes?

CEOs achieve action and results through others- but can this be frustrating? Are CEOs driven by powerful negative emotions such as anger?

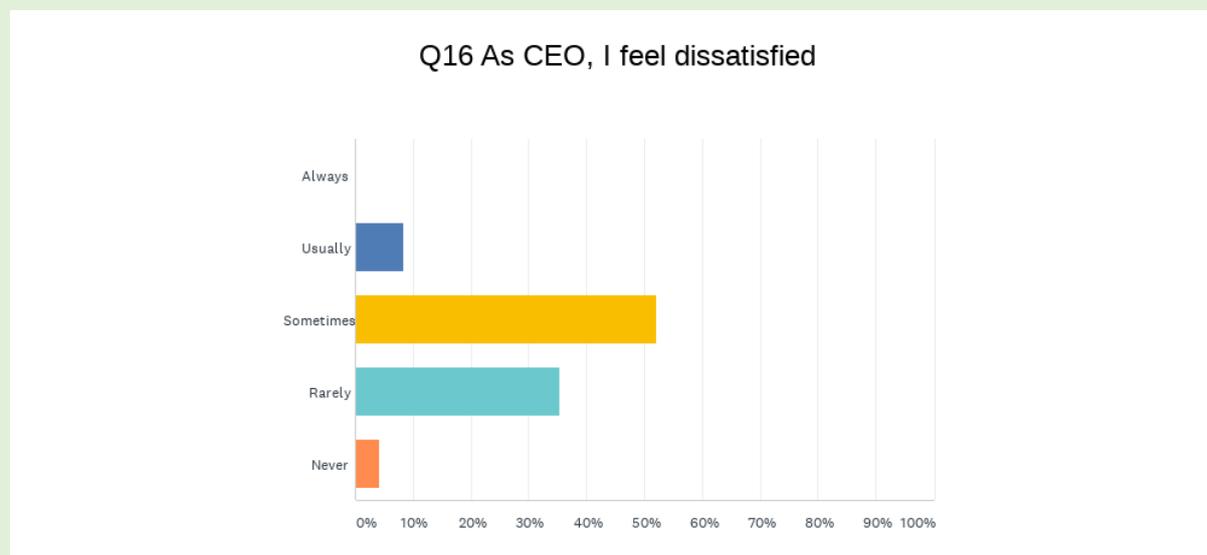
### ARE CEOs NEGATIVELY EMOTIONALLY AROUSED INDIVIDUALS?

The group of high arousal, negative emotions identified for, and used in, the survey were

- **Dissatisfaction**
- **Anger**
- **Frustration**
- **Embarrassment**
- **Annoyance**
- **Disappointment**

### **Dissatisfaction**

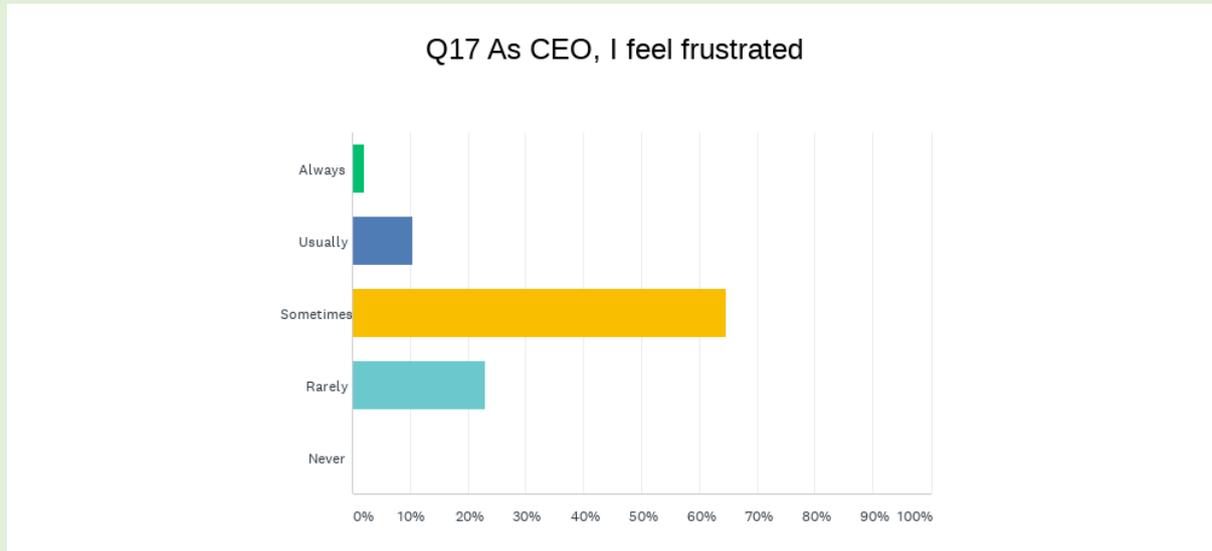
Almost 40% of CEOs in the survey “rarely” or “never” feel **dissatisfaction**. Just over 50% feel dissatisfaction “sometimes”. Dissatisfaction is not a regularly felt emotion.



What is not clear is what happens when CEOs do feel dissatisfied.

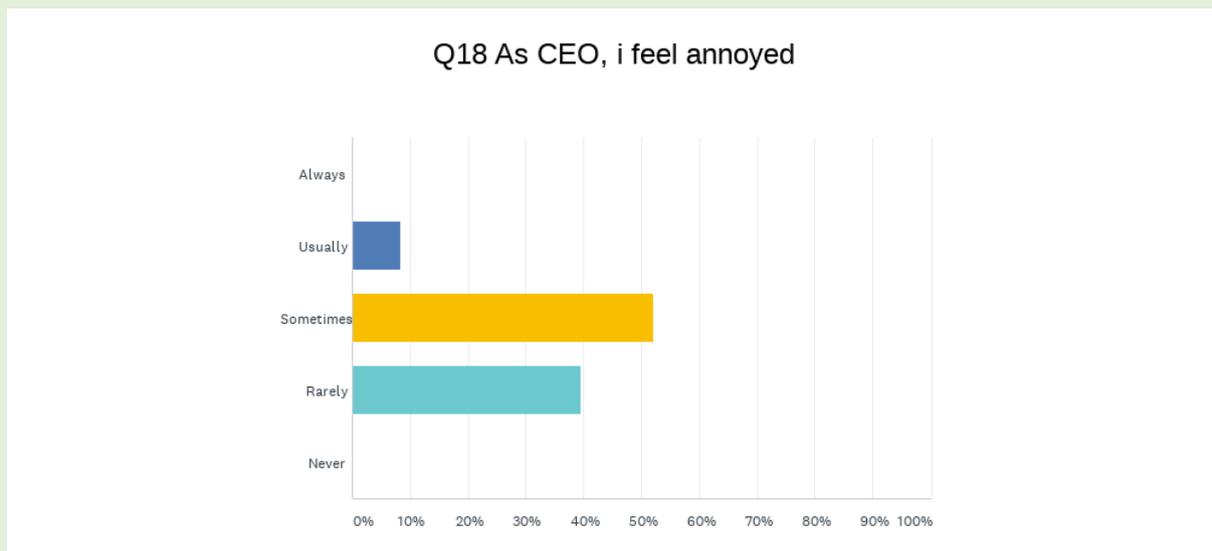
## Frustration

64% of CEOs “sometimes” feel **frustrated**. Less than 15% of CEOs feel frustrated “always” or “usually”.



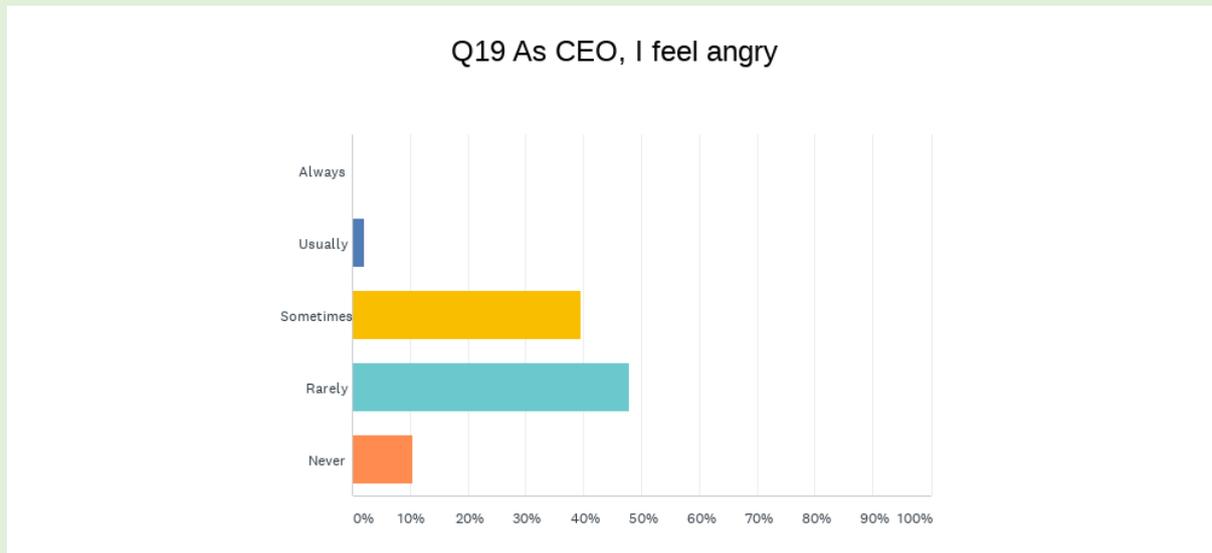
## Annoyance

Almost 40% of CEOs “rarely” feel **annoyed**, and just over 50% only feel annoyed “sometimes”.



## Anger

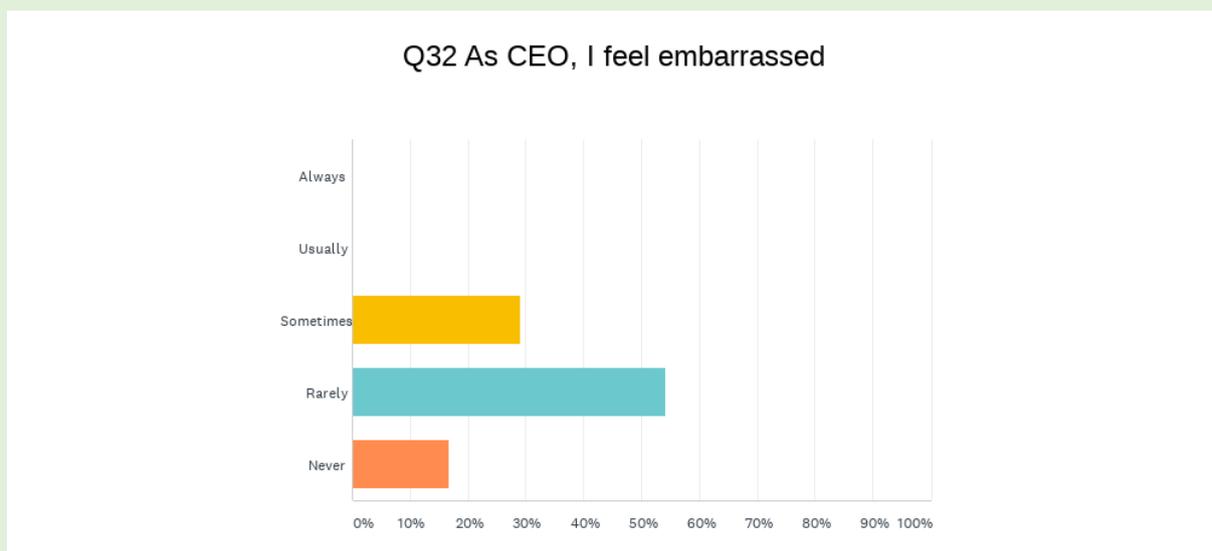
Do CEOs often feel angry? Over 50% “never” or “rarely” feel **anger**. 43% feel angry “sometimes”, and only 2% (1 person) “usually” feels angry. Anger is therefore not a frequently felt emotion.



Again, it is not clear what the implications are when a CEO does feel angry.

## Embarrassed

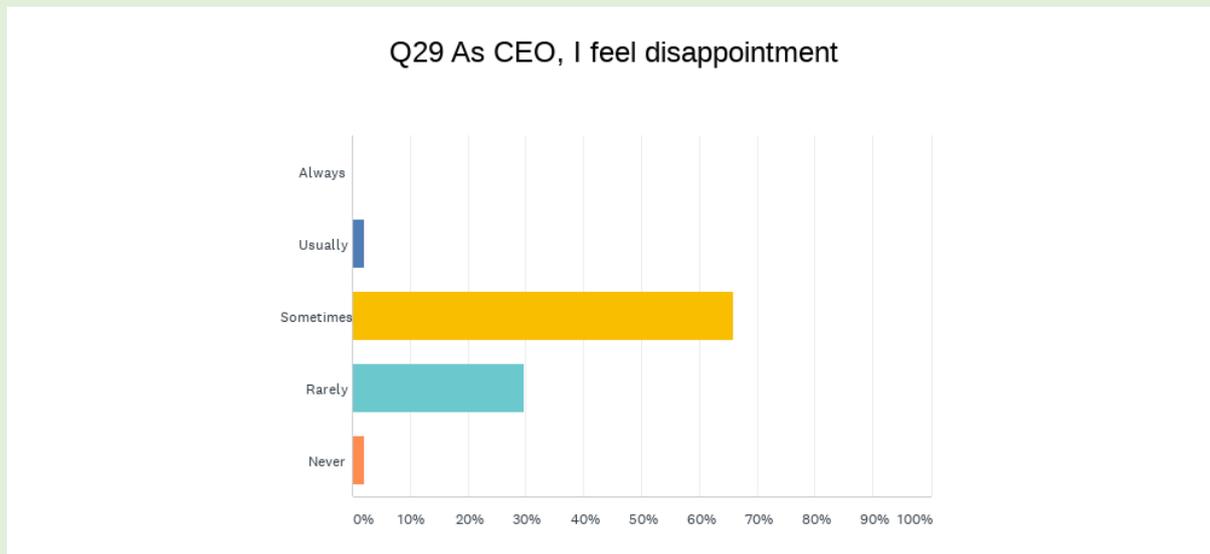
70% of CEOs “never” or “rarely” feel **embarrassed**. None “always” or “usually” feel embarrassed.



So, CEOs do not usually feel dissatisfied, frustrated, annoyed, angry, or embarrassed. But do they “switch off” and feel disappointment and boredom instead?

### Disappointment

Over 30% of CEOs “rarely” or “never” feel **disappointment**, and the remaining 70% only feel it sometimes.



I cover boredom in a later section.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### The overall picture

The outputs of this survey suggest that high arousal negative emotions are not often felt by CEOs- albeit they are felt by most at one time or another- with anger being quite rare.

What would be interesting to explore further is if there are circumstances or situations which drive such negative emotions? Also, to explore the impact on the CEO, their Board and management team colleagues and on the organisation of these occasionally felt emotions.

It is also worth noting that just because an emotion is rare, that does not mean that when it is felt it does not have a high impact- which could be either positive or negative.

A volcano only needs to erupt once to cause devastation, but the ash and lava can produce very fertile ground, and the underlying heat a source of energy!

## RELUCTANT, REGRETFUL AND SAD.

We have seen that CEOs normally experience a lot of positive emotion towards their organisation and its purpose and towards other people, but also sometimes experience some high arousal negative emotions.

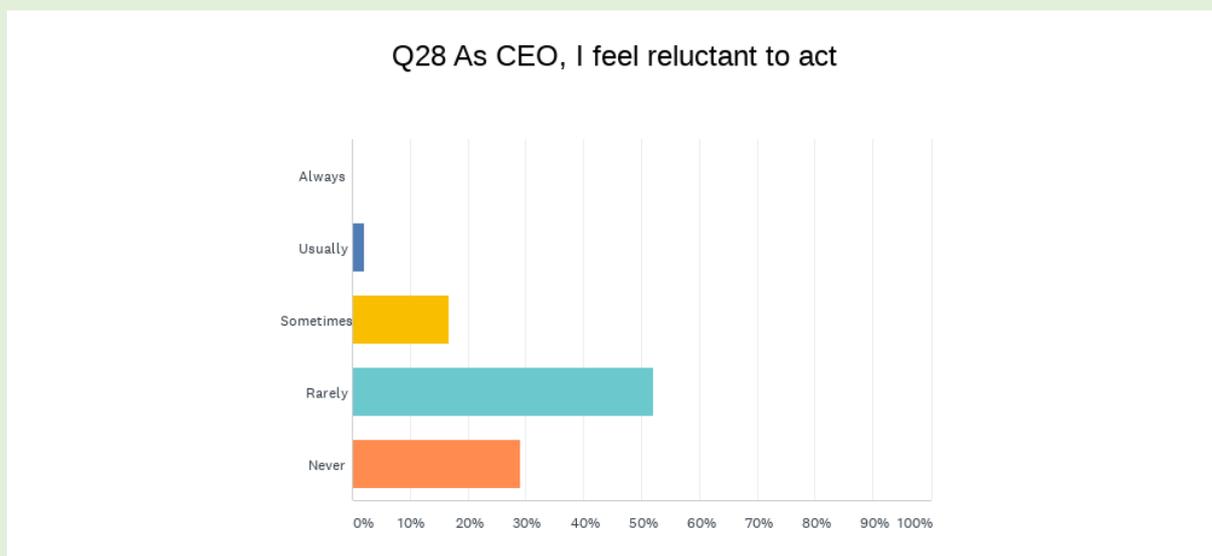
But are they reluctant to act on these emotions, and if and when they do, do CEO's typically regret actions they have taken, or decisions made?

This section considers the following emotions

- **Reluctance**
- **Regret**
- **Sadness**

### Reluctant?

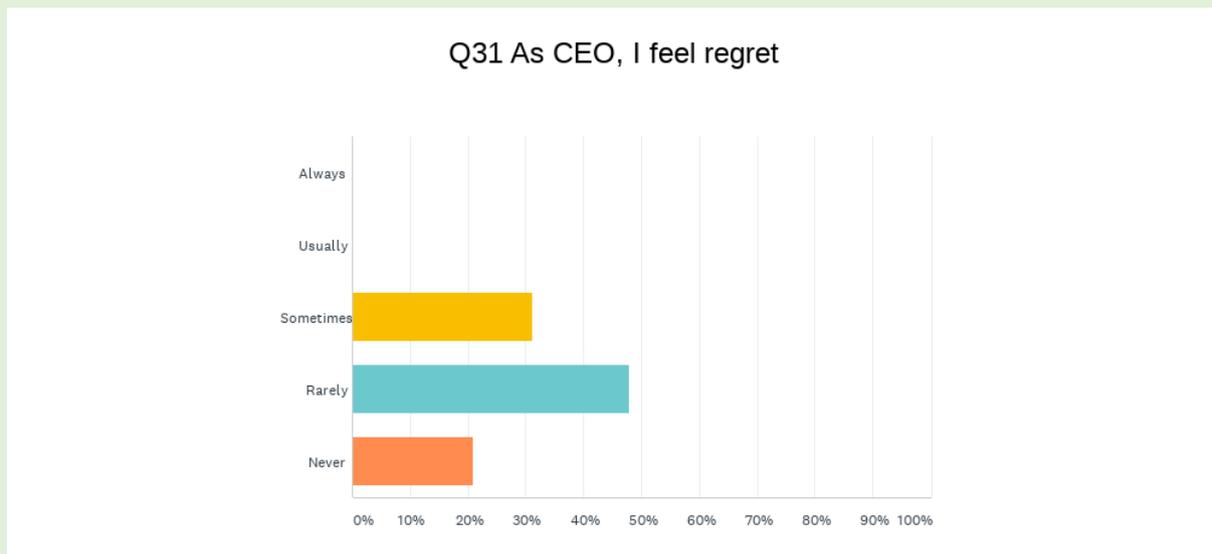
82% of CEOs rarely or never feel **reluctant** to act. That probably shows a strong predilection for action. Two key follow-on questions, however, are "should they act?", or "when should they act?"



### Regretful?

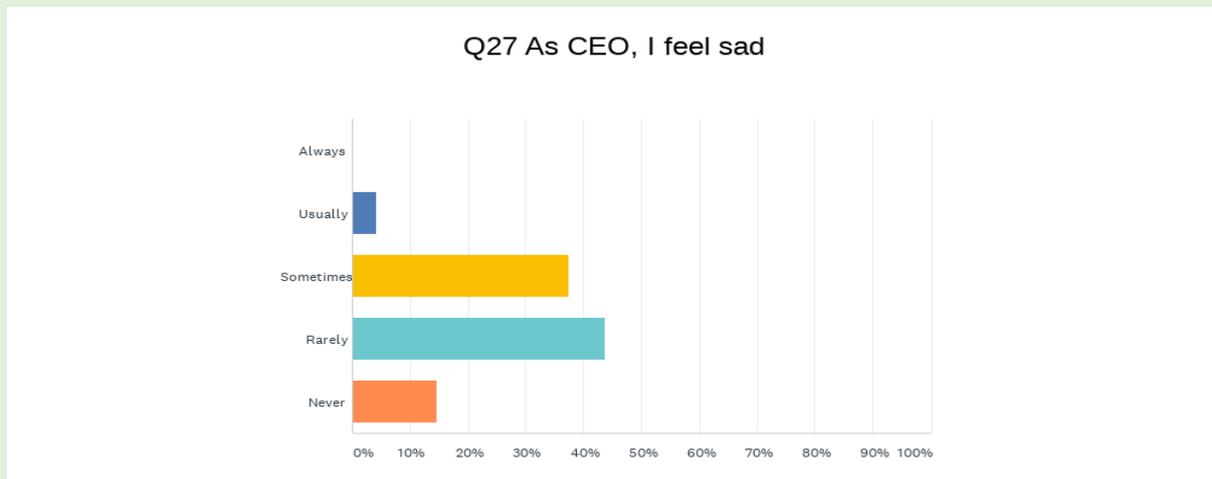
CEO's may not therefore be reluctant to act. But do they regret their actions afterwards?

Almost 70% of those surveyed "never" or "rarely" feel **regret**. The remainder "sometimes" felt regret but none of the CEOs who were surveyed "usually" or "always" feel regrets.



### Sad?

55% of CEOs "never" or "rarely" feel **sad**. 40% "sometimes" feel sad.



### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Reluctance, regret and sadness would therefore not appear to be emotions commonly felt by CEOs. This probably reflects that they normally feel incredibly positive emotions.

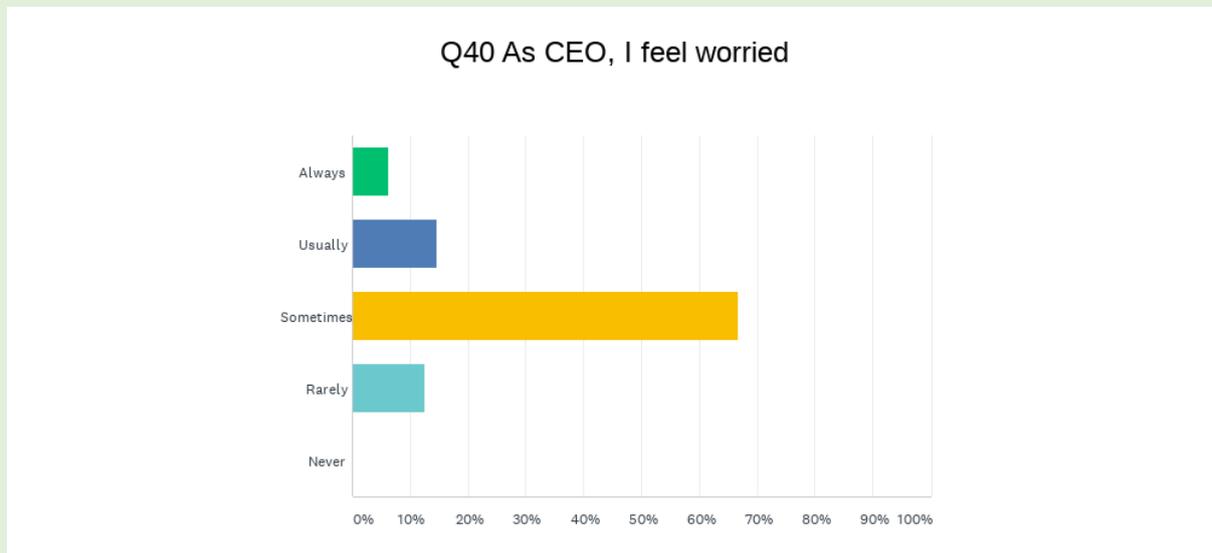
## WORRIED AND DOUBTFUL.

CEOs are responsible for the livelihoods of other people, and, to a greater or lesser degree, the health and wellbeing of those people. This might suggest that worry and doubt might be emotions felt by many- particularly away from the gaze of the organisation where they may choose to put on a brave face. Worry and doubt are negative emotions with moderate to high levels of arousal.

- **worry**
- **doubt**

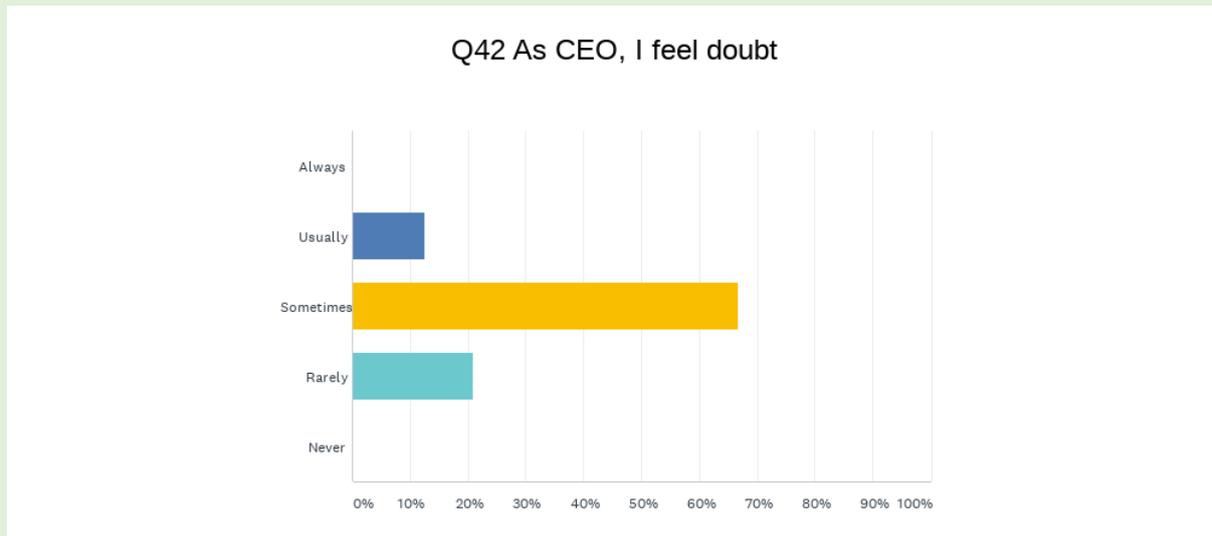
### Worried?

Less than 20% of CEOs normally feel **worried**. Equally less than 15% rarely feel worried. Most CEOs “sometimes” feel worried.



## Doubting?

**Doubt** is not a normal emotion for a CEO, either. Approximately 10% normally feel doubt and approximately 20% rarely feel doubt. 70% sometimes feel doubt.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Worry and doubt are not emotions normally felt by CEOs- but most CEOs feel them sometimes.

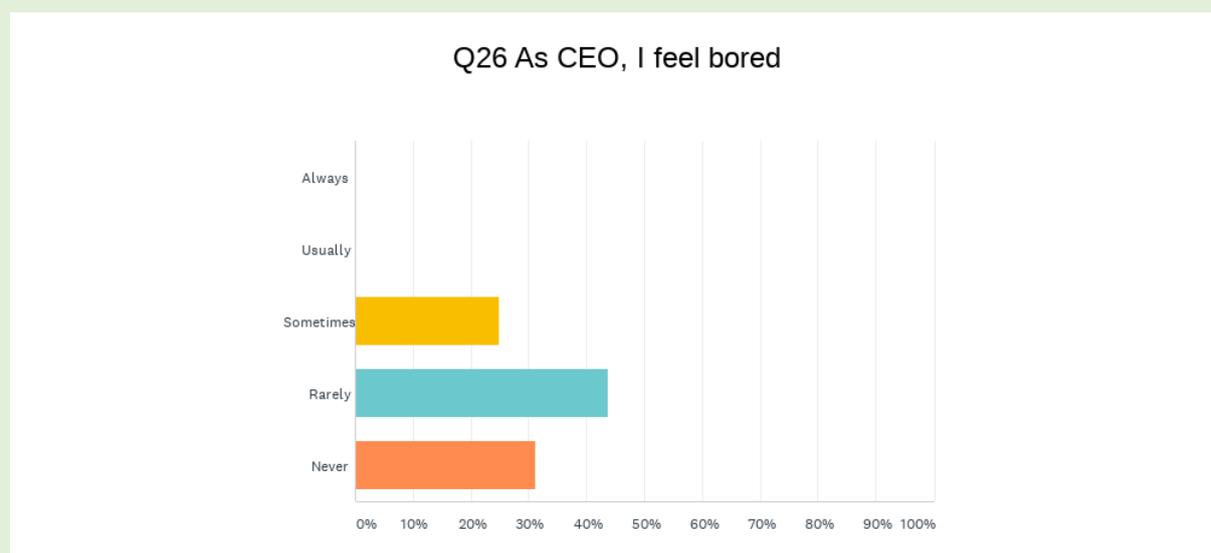
## BORED.

The CEO, as a general manager, has a wide range of matters in which to be involved and the nature of their work can range from “helicopter overviews” and long- range planning to diving deep into detail and addressing short term issues. Whether they are the CEO of a small team or a large organisation, their time is typically in demand from colleagues, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and other stakeholders. This makes the role inherently interesting and challenging. In view of the high engagement and interest levels of CEOs which was covered earlier, and the nature of the role, it might be expected that Boredom, a negative, low arousal emotion, is rarely felt by CEOs.

### Bored?

The survey suggests, as expected, that boredom is an emotion rarely felt by CEOs.

Almost 73% of the surveyed CEOs claim “rarely” or “never” to feel **bored**. None claim to feel “always” or “usually” bored.



Whether this lack of boredom is because of the demands of the role, or because the type of person who becomes a CEO is interested in a wide range of things is not clear. It is possibly a “nature or nurture” question.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

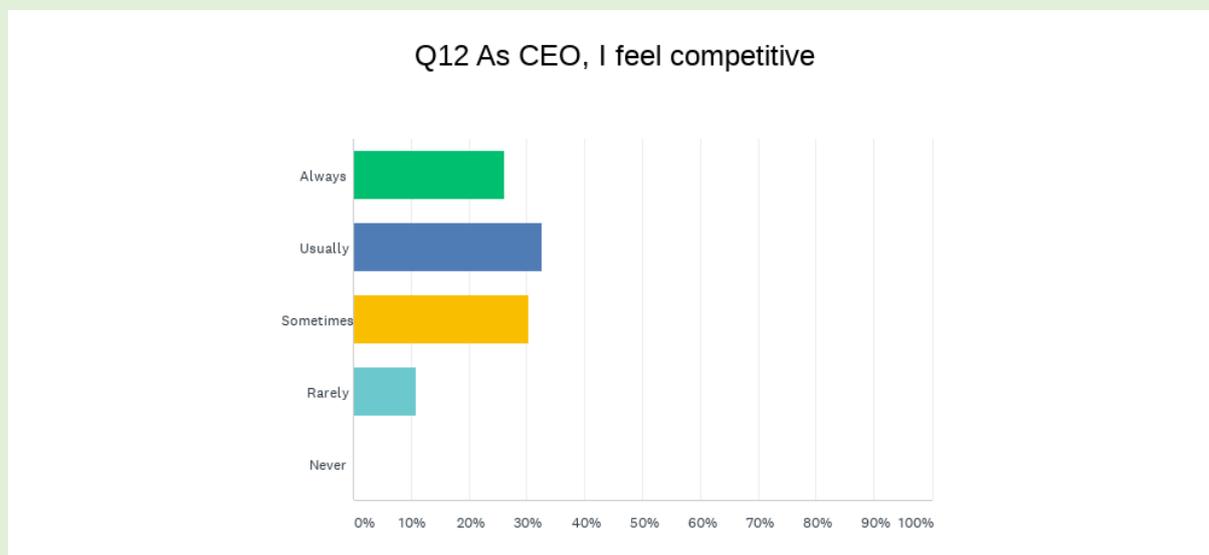
A CEO is unlikely to feel bored. If they do start to feel bored then the reasons for such need careful assessment and addressing. The consequences also need such analysis.

## COMPETITIVE.

Many people will expect someone who has become a CEO to be an extremely competitive person, driven to be successful and to lead, and who wants the organisation which they lead to be equally successful and to lead its competitors. So, do CEO's feel competitive, which is a positive, high arousal emotion and, if so, is this for all the time?

### Competitive?

The results may be surprising! Not because almost 60% "always" or "usually" feel competitive, but that just over 40% do not.



### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This result is interesting because it is perhaps unexpected. This may show that CEOs feel collaborative (a question not asked) for a significant amount of the time, rather than feeling competitive, or it may reflect, perhaps, a difference between sectors (there is a slight hint of this in this small sample) where collaboration can be more important than being competitive. And/or it may reflect that they do feel competitive for the organisation but not within the organisation. Food for thought and further investigation.

## TRUSTING.

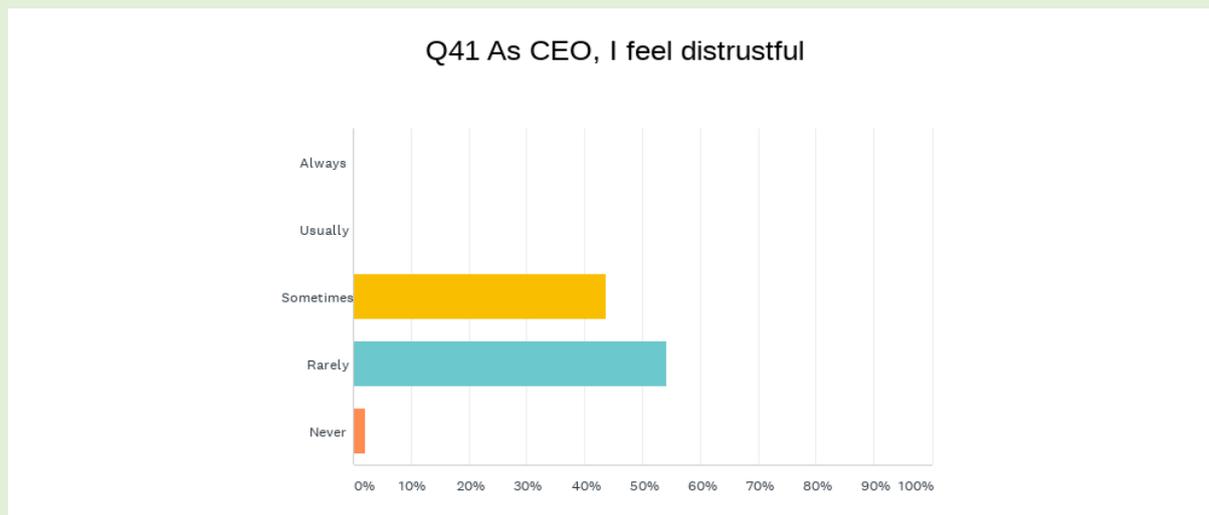
The success, or otherwise, of a CEO is highly dependent on the actions of others within the organisation; the employees and supply chain who enable the organisation to successfully deliver its goods and/or services, the executive team, and the support of the governing body- the Board- to enable the CEO to effectively lead the executive. It also requires the support of key external stakeholders, particularly the owners and the organisation's customers, plus its bankers, and where relevant, its regulators.

Does this huge dependency on third parties, make CEOs naturally suspicious of others, or very trusting of others?

### Trusting

The survey suggests that CEO's are normally very trusting. Almost 60% of CEOs "never" or "rarely" feel **distrustful**, and the remaining 40% only sometimes.

Interestingly, the longer the CEO has held such a post, the more trusting they are. This may reflect that they have had longer to build teams that they trust and assurance systems that allow them to be more trusting, or it may be that experience shows that you can be more trusting.



### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chief Executives are normally trusting. It might be argued that the nature of their role means that if they were not then they would not be able to function effectively.

This strong level of trust does throw up some interesting points.

- Who in the organisation will bring a level of sceptical scrutiny to ensure that what the CEO and the Board is being told is robust?
- When a CEO does not feel trusting, who is it that they do not trust? Why? and When? And what are the consequences?

## HAPPY, LAUGHING AND RELAXED.

What we appear to have discovered, so far, based on the (flawed) survey, is that CEOs normally experience high arousal positive emotions, and sometimes experience medium arousal negative emotions, and very occasionally get angry- a high arousal negative emotion.

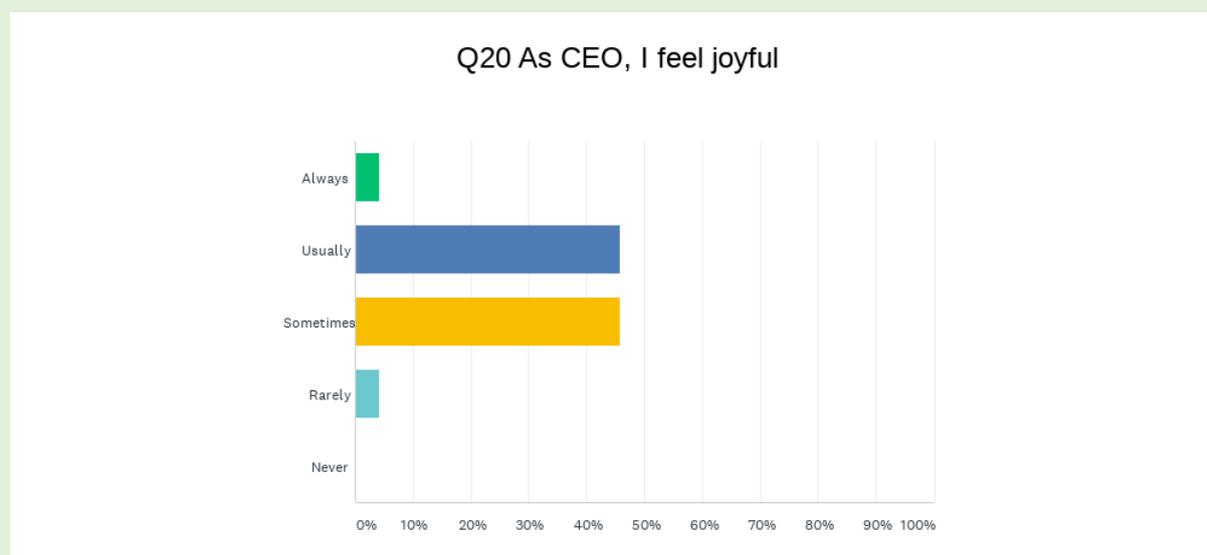
But does this mean that CEO's normally feel **happy**, **amused**, and **relaxed**, which are lower arousal positive emotions.

This chapter considers the following three positive emotions

- Joy
- Amusement
- Relaxed

### Joyful?

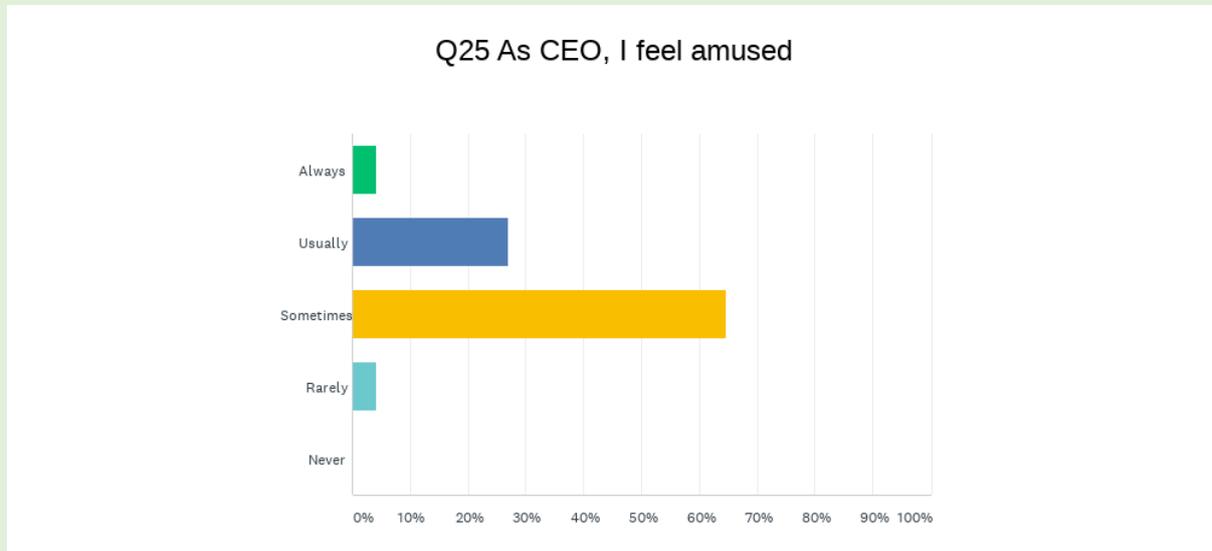
Almost 50% claim to be **joyful** "usually". 43% claim to be joyful "sometimes". Less than 5% of the CEOs surveyed claim to be "rarely" or "never" joyful. So, whilst the vast majority are not normally joyful, joyfulness is not an unusual emotion, and to rarely feel it would be very unusual.



How this compares to the population at large would be interesting! Are CEOs more or less joyful than anyone else?

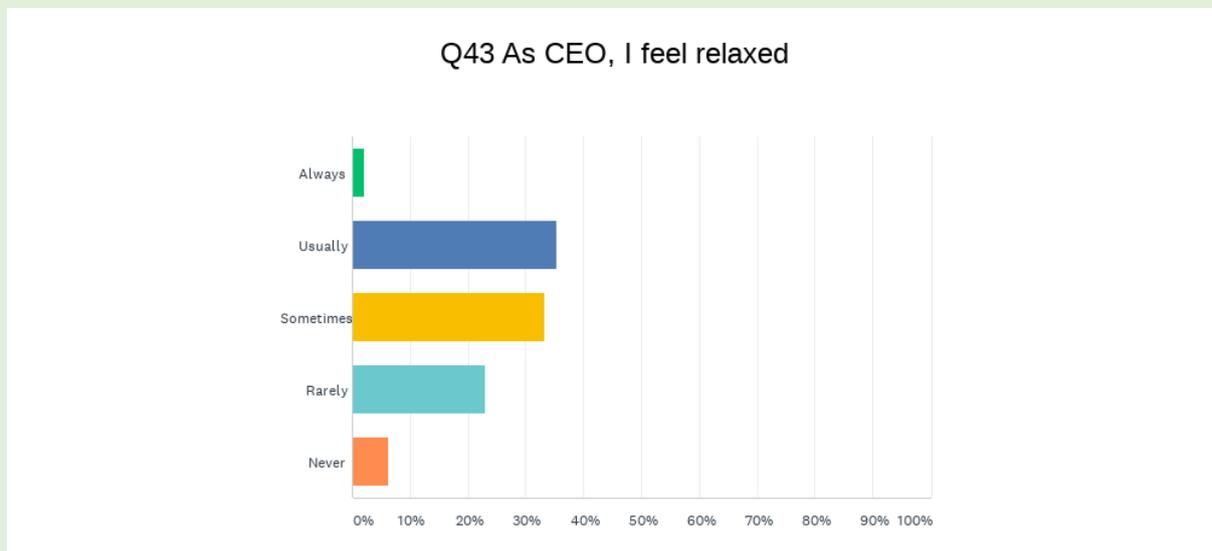
### Amused?

Do CEOs regularly find **amusement** in their roles? It appears that it is not an unusual emotion, but it is not a normal emotion felt by the majority. 64% “sometimes” feel amused, and around 30% of CEOs “always” or “usually” feel amused. 4% “rarely” feel amused.



### Relaxed?

The survey results for this question have generated the widest range of responses, with high percentages in each group. Almost 30% of CEOs “never” or “rarely” feel **relaxed**. Around 40% “always” or “usually” feel relaxed, and the remaining 30% “sometimes” feel relaxed.



### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Joyfulness, amusement and feeling relaxed are not normal feelings for a dominant majority of CEOs. Equally, they are not rare emotions.

It would appear the answer “depends”. It is not clear from the survey what it “depends upon”!

## LONELY, INSECURE, UNLOVED AND TIRED.

The CEO role is the pinnacle of the executive pyramid. It is a role that the most ambitious, most driven, and most capable leaders typically aspire to fulfil within an organisation.

The previous sections have shown that CEOs feel positive, are rarely bored, are highly competitive, often happy, and are trusting.

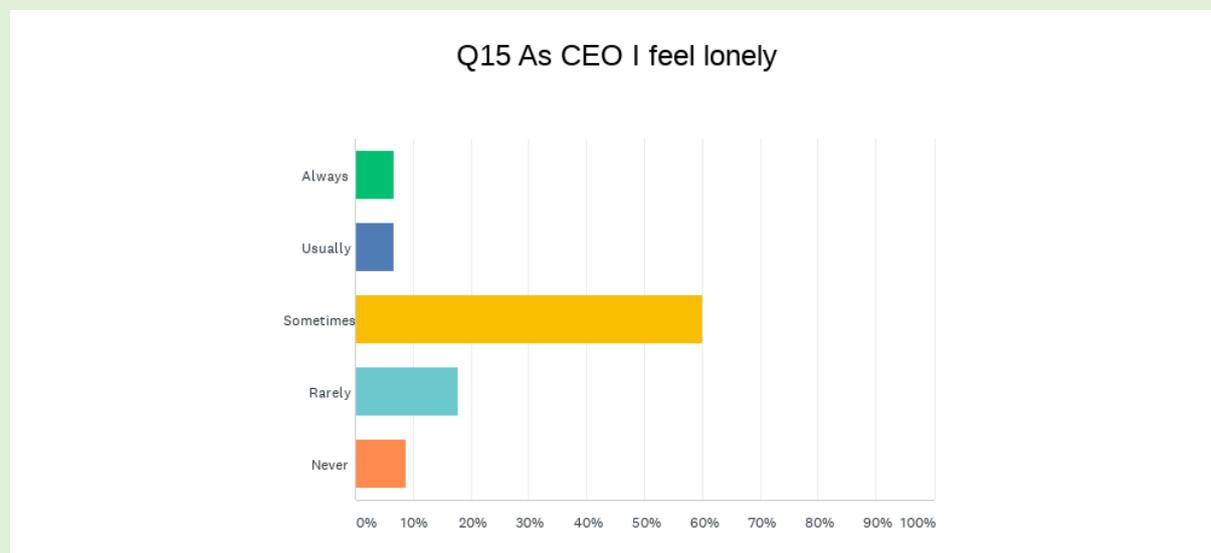
The perception of many people, and probably the image portrayed by most, if not all, CEOs is of self-assurance and self-confidence. And these previously identified emotions might also suggest that too.

However, my survey suggests that

- 75% feel **lonely** at some stage.
- 70% do not always feel **admired**.
- 55% of CEOs feel **insecure** of their position at some stage, with 10% always or usually feeling like that.
- 50% of CEOs only feel **successful** “sometimes”
- 27% of CEOs always feel **tired**.

### The lonely CEO

- 75% of all CEOs feel **lonely** at some stage.



CEOs are also typically part of a Board of Directors which has responsibility for the governance of the organisation, and to whom the CEO reports. In the UK, this Board would normally have a Chair who is not the CEO. The Board usually contains some Non-Executive Directors. The legal responsibilities are the same for the Non-Executive Directors as for the executive Directors including the CEO. Legally, therefore, in the UK, CEOs are not alone.

Where CEOs are unique, however, is being the pinnacle of delivery of organisational performance, and having the powers for such delegated to them by the Board, and thus the focus of scrutiny of such by both the governing body and the external stakeholders such as shareholders, regulators etc.

The position is therefore lonely as it is unique in terms of responsibility and accountability.

However, if the CEO is part of a supportive, effective executive team, and a supportive, reasonable Board then the feelings of being alone in the role, all things being equal should be less than if that is not the case.

Might the common, albeit infrequent, feeling of loneliness experienced by the CEO partially reflect, therefore, that the CEO may not feel supported by

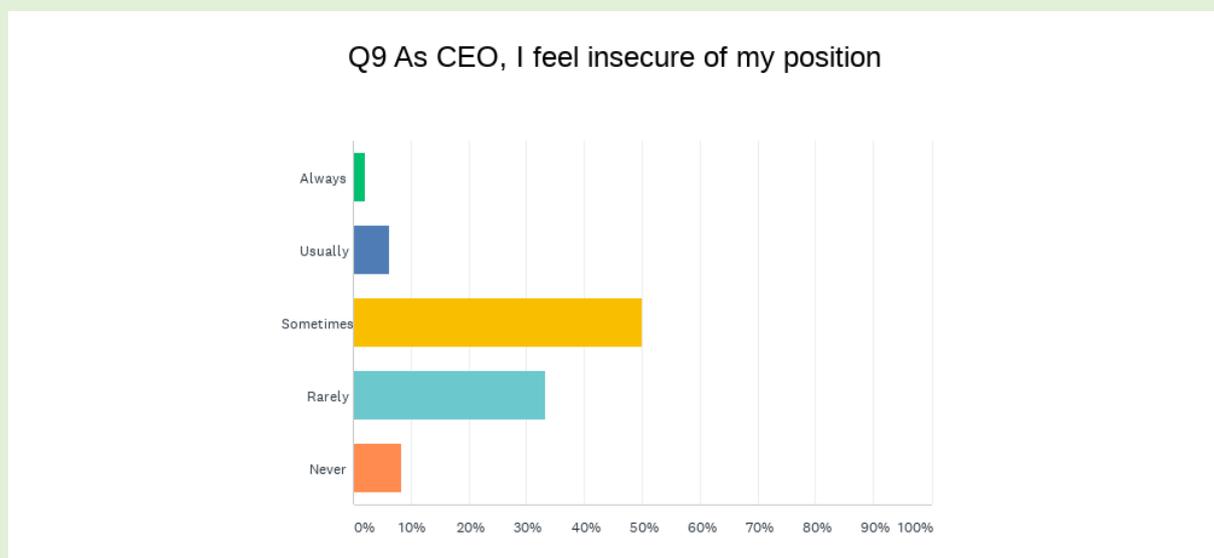
- the executive team?
- the Board?
- external stakeholders?

And, if so, why?

Might the reasons vary between sectors? For example, third sector organisations do not have, by and large, external shareholders, although their regulators can be powerful stakeholders.

### Insecure

55% of CEOs feel **insecure** at some stage.

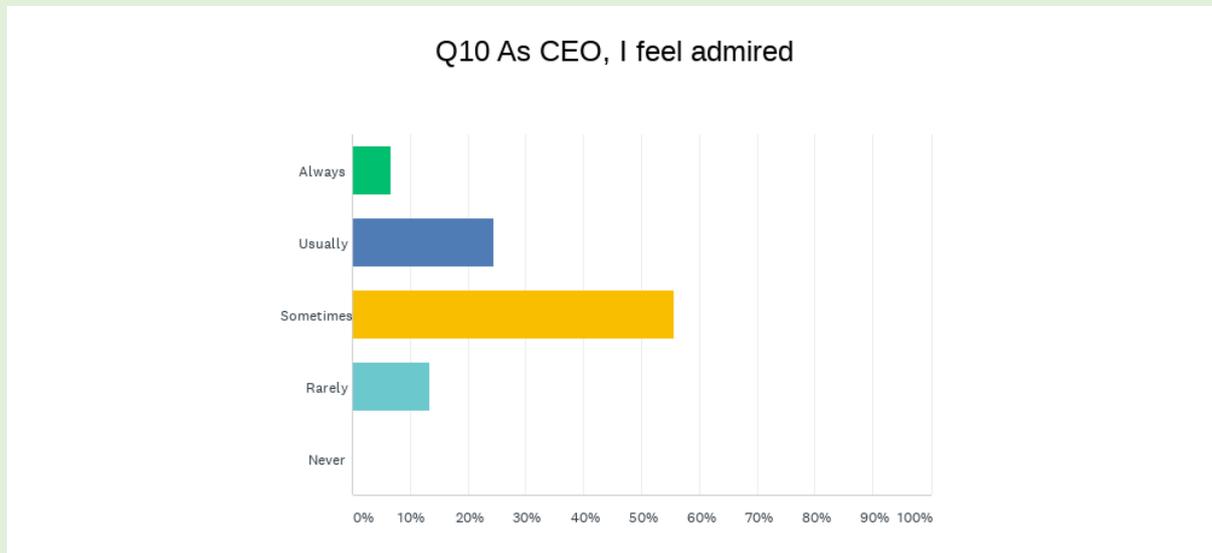


With the average tenure of a CEO being a relatively few years, does that mean they have good reason to feel insecure?

Or is a feeling of insecurity an inherent characteristic of people who become CEOs rather than a result of being one? Furthermore, do CEOs feel more insecure than anyone else?

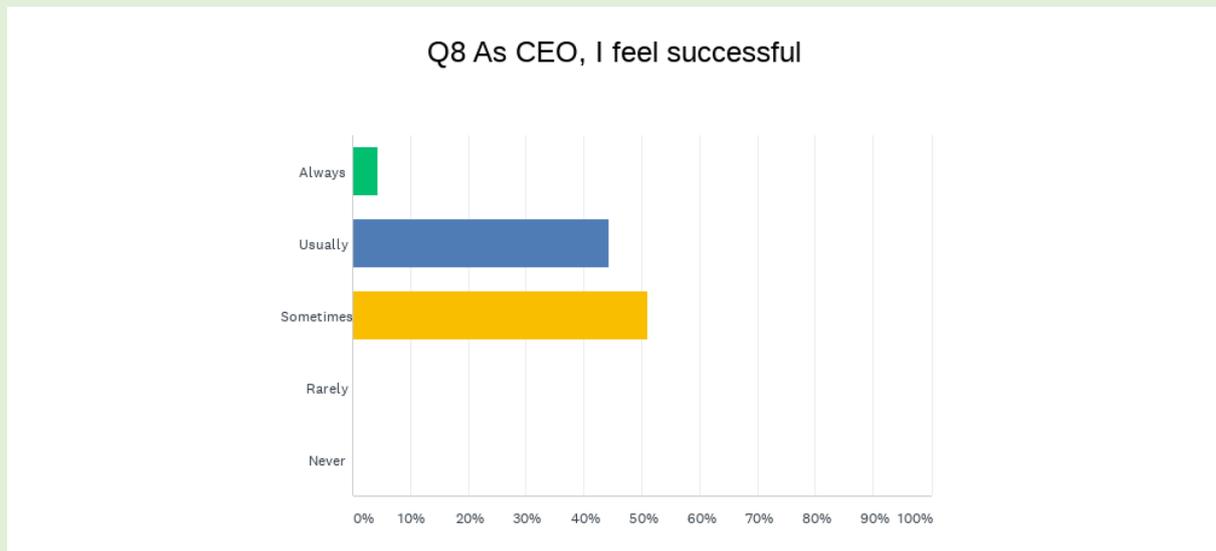
### CEOs do not feel admired

Perhaps surprisingly, 70% of CEOs do not always feel admired. Does this reflect the insecurity experienced above- or vice versa? Or is it a reflection of a perception of CEOs in society? Or is it a key characteristic, a “chip on the shoulder” that drives them in search of achievement and recognition?



### CEOs do not feel successful

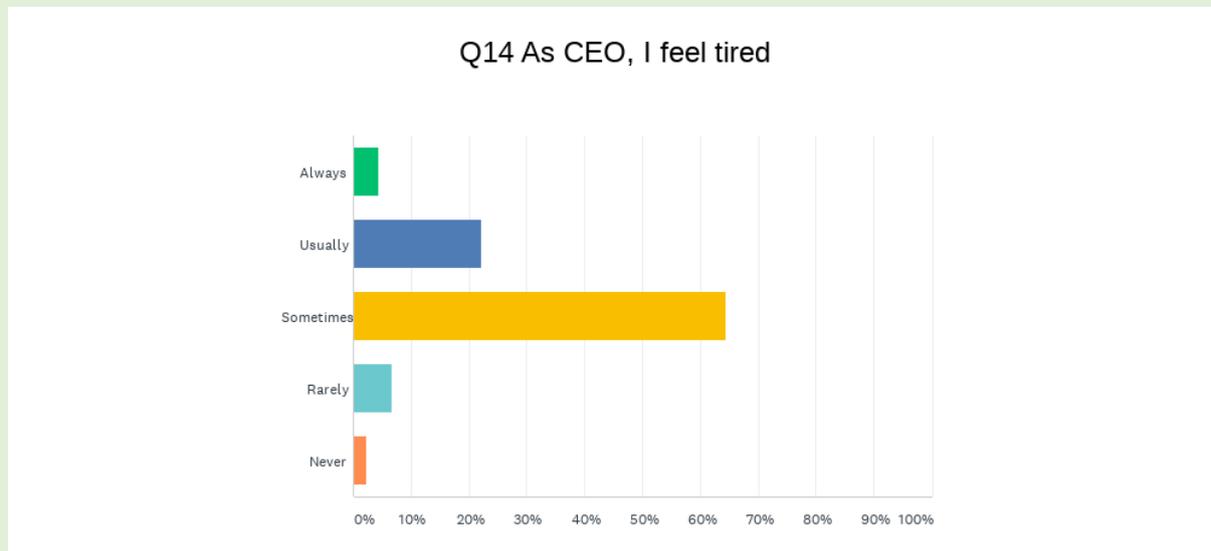
Even more surprisingly, perhaps is that 50% of CEOs only feel successful “sometimes”.



Of course, this may reflect that they are not being successful, or the insecurity and perceived lack of admiration covered above, and/or their personality and continuously trying to achieve extremely high standards.

### Tired

27% of CEOs feel always or usually feel tired. Another 65% sometimes feel tired.



This raises interesting questions about effectiveness and efficiency of performance, and impact on behaviours, if almost 25% of CEOs are always tired. This may or may not be different to people in any other role where the same questions would also apply.

It also begs the question- why are they tired? Is it because they are working too hard? Is it a result of living with high arousal positive emotions for most of the time and the tiredness reflects them coming down from a “high”?

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

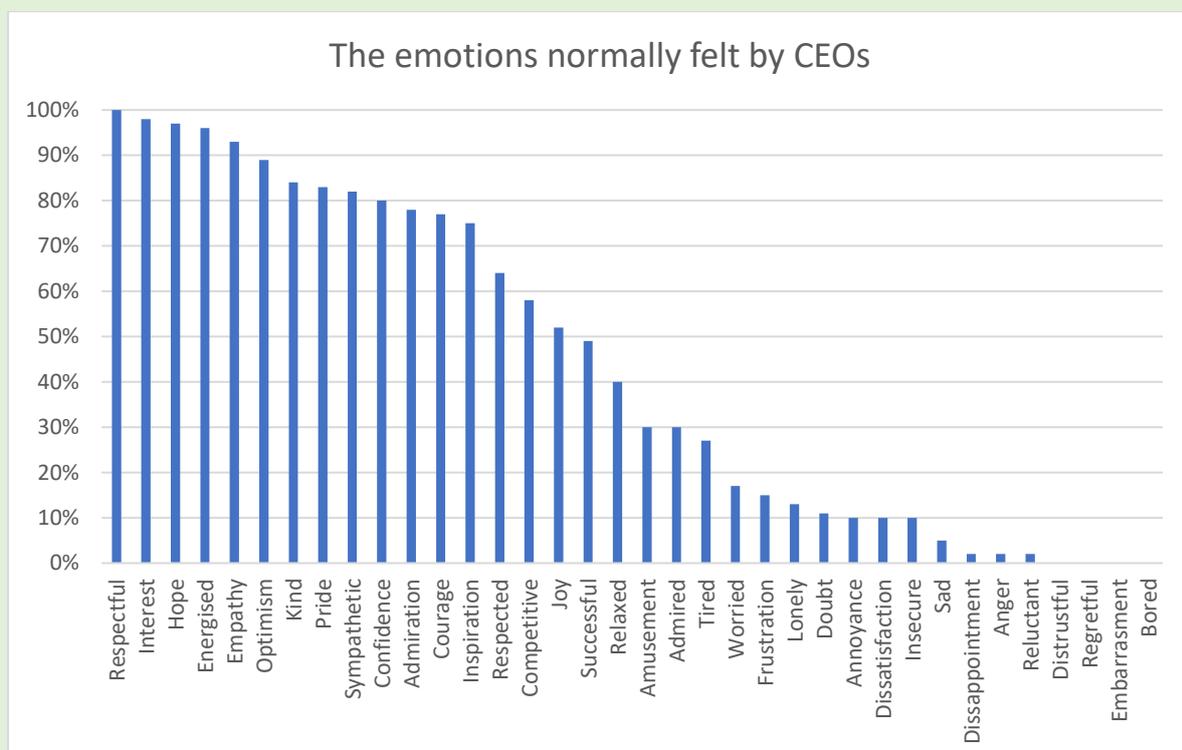
A significant percentage of CEOs in the sample would seem to experience some strong negative emotions about themselves and their position for a significant amount of time.

They feel lonely, insecure, not admired, and tired. It would seem probable that there are personal and organisational consequences of such.

## THE EMOTIONAL CEO- A SUMMARY.

### THE NORMAL EMOTIONS

The survey indicates, certainly for the group of CEOs who participated, that there around 15 emotions that are normally (“always” and “usually”) felt by CEOs, as highlighted in the diagram below. These are all positive emotions. Many of them are also high arousal emotions. What also appears to be the case are that these are emotions that focus on other people (respect, empathy, admiration, sympathy, and kindness) or on the organisation and its work (interest, optimism, pride, confidence). Those which might be considered as focusing on “self” are high arousal positive emotions too (energised, courage, inspiration).



### UNUSUAL EMOTIONS

It is unusual for CEOs to feel bored, sad, reluctant, regretful, embarrassed, distrustful, or angry. But it is not unheard of.

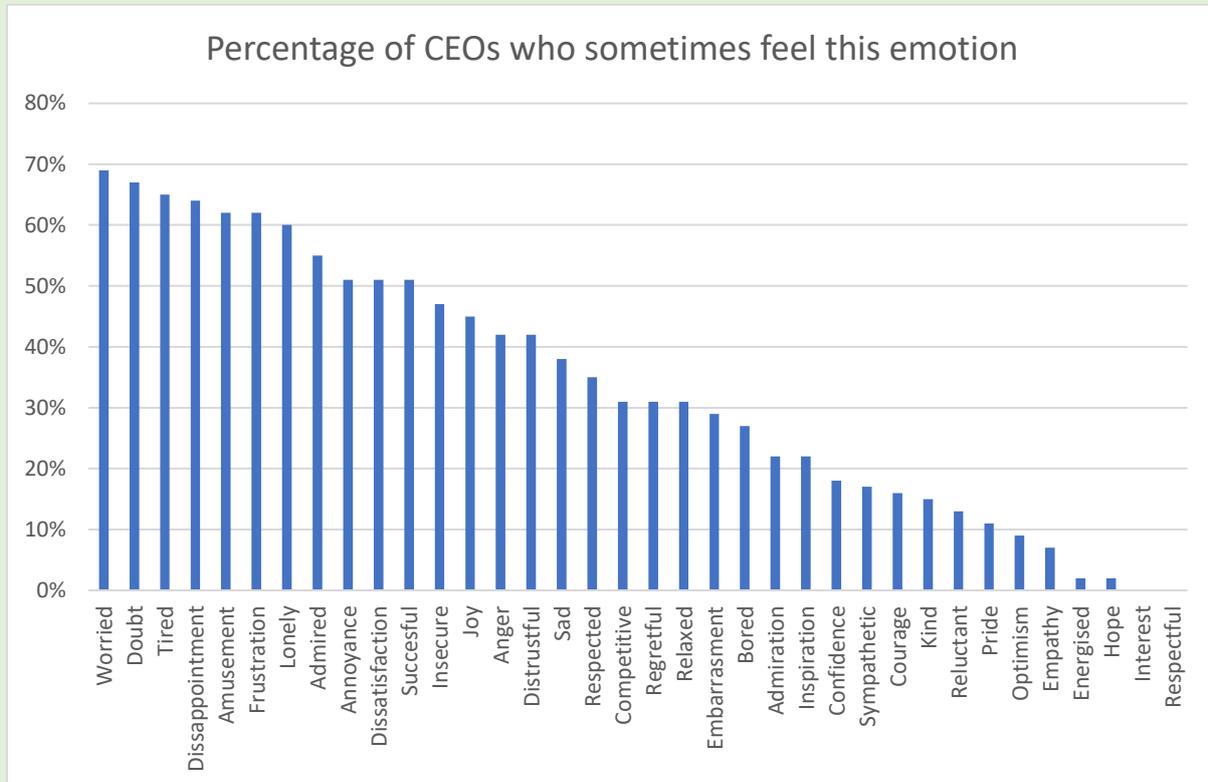
This might suggest that CEOs are positively minded solution finders.

It also suggests that understanding the causes and consequences of these rare negative emotions might be important, as some of them, like anger, are powerful emotions.

### OCCASIONAL EMOTIONS

Despite this positivity, occasionally CEOs are going to feel worried, doubtful, disappointed, dissatisfied, frustrated, annoyed, lonely, and tired.

They are also going to feel joyful, amused and admired on frequent occasions.



### SELF-CENTRED EMOTIONS

The survey results showing self-centred emotions for CEOs are interesting. Only 50% normally feel joyful and successful. Only 40% normally feel relaxed and 30% amused. Only 30% normally feel admired. Whilst it is not normal to feel lonely, 60% will at some stage. 45% will feel insecure at some stage. Self-centred positive emotions seem to be much less normal. However self-centred negative emotions are not normal either. Is this low self-esteem?

This might suggest a pattern of emotions towards the organisation and colleagues that are high arousal positive emotions, with negative dips from time to time. These negative dips may occasionally include high arousal negative emotions such as anger but are more likely to be frustration and/or disappointment. A CEO's self-centred emotions, on the other hand, appear to be less positive, with low arousal negative ones possibly more prevalent than low arousal positive ones.

### THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE

As far as I can tell from my analysis of the survey results, it appears that many of the emotions remain relatively constant throughout the length of time people have spent in CEO roles- albeit, as mentioned earlier, it is a small sample.

There appear to be a group of emotions, however, that vary relatively significantly in years 3 to 5 of a CEO's tenure. There is a decrease in some positive emotions and an increase in some negative emotions, as follows

Emotion	Change
Inspiration	Reduces
Confidence	Reduces
Regret	Reduces
Frustration	Increases*
Annoyance	Increases*
Dissatisfaction	Increases*

\*for some but disappears for most.

In association with these changes in this period, more CEOs feel lonely more often, and feel less joyful and less admired, less competitive. A number of CEO's "interest" also reduces from "always" to "usually".

There appears to be a reversal of most of these trends in the following 5 to 10 years. This might reflect either the CEO has addressed these issues or normalised them emotionally, or that a group of CEOs have been weeded out or left at this stage. It may also be that at this stage some CEOs become cumulatively more tired and need a rest- which might reflect the situation that they are dealing with. Crisis management and transformation can be very tiring. That would reflect my own experience.

#### OVERALL SUMMARY

Based on the results of the survey, it appears that CEOs are not typically, "Jekyll and Hide" characters. They are highly aroused emotionally positive characters.

## THE ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF CEO EMOTIONS.

The survey, if representative, indicates that CEOs normally experience lots of positive high arousal emotions. But what are the potential implications of such?

This next chapter considers the implications for the CEO, for the governing body of the organisation, for the executive team, and for the organisation as a whole. The chapter following this considers the impact on CEO mental and physical health.

The final chapter considers how these consequences can be mitigated or magnified, as appropriate.

### DECISION MAKING AND BEHAVIOURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CEO

It appears that normal life for a CEO is based around experiencing high arousal positive emotions. These are “can do, will do” people. But what might this mean for their decision making and behaviours?

#### **Impact on decisions?**

A paper submitted to the Annual Review of Psychology in June 2014 by scholars (Lerner, Li, Vadesolo, Kassam) from a range of leading US universities examined research on the impact of emotion on decision making. They highlighted a range of theories and models which have been put forward and that there is not yet a consensus. As part of their review, they identified some studies which showed emotional valence or intensity, is not sufficient on its own to understand emotions’ impact on decision making. They also illustrated that in some other models, it is believed that specific emotions generate specific responses- for example “anger” generates “fight” and “fear” generates “flight”. However, this is a complex area in its relative infancy.

Lerner et al’s summary makes the point that whatever the model or theory that it appears clear

*“emotion and decision making go hand in hand”*

It is thus important for CEOs, the Board, and the executive team to at least be aware of this point, and not believe all, or perhaps any, decisions are purely based on analysis, logical debate, and rationality.

#### **Impact on attitude to risk?**

Research also highlights that several studies appear to show a link between attitudes to risk taking and emotion. An article in Frontiers in Psychology (11 December 2017) by three Italian academics (Galentino, Bonini, Savadori) indicate there are studies that show that there appears to be a link between emotional stress (positive or negative) and attitude to risk, with emotionally stressed people more prone to take risky decisions compared to non-stressed people. Furthermore, some studies suggest that positive arousal can lead to sub-optimal behaviours such as impulse buying and a predilection for “sooner-smaller” rewards compared to “future-bigger” reward. Their own study supported a link between high arousal positive emotions and acceptance of higher risks.

### Impact on creativity?

An article in the Harvard Business Review, (Kaufman, 12/8/15), suggests that the long-standing view in psychology is that positive emotions are conducive to creativity because they broaden the mind, whereas negative emotions are detrimental to creativity because they narrow one's focus, but then argues that this view is too simplistic for a number of reasons. It goes on to discuss studies which show that high arousal emotions, whether positive or negative, lead to a focusing of the mind, whereas low arousal emotions lead to a broadening of the mind. It presumes that this is because low motivational states facilitate the search for new goals to pursue, whereas high motivational states focus individuals on completing a specific goal.

This might suggest that because it appears that CEOs run on high arousal positive emotions that they may not be particularly creative- but extremely focused.

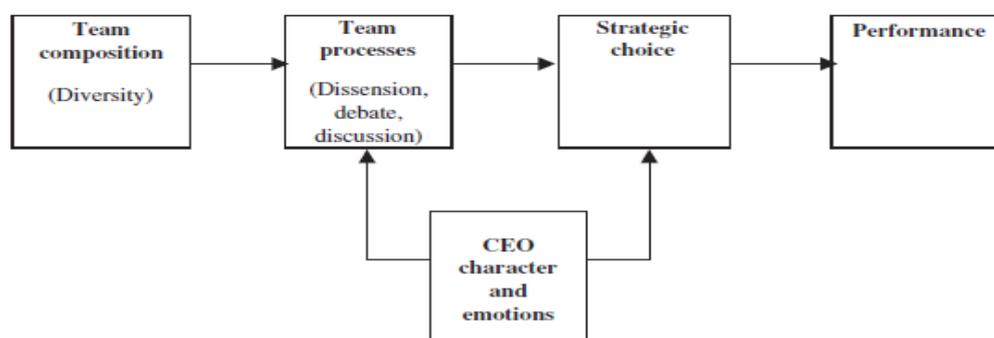
The article has an interesting conclusion, very apt for CEOs.

*“So next time you want to keep an open mind and see the big picture, it's probably best if you're just in a pleasant (or even sad) mood. If you are too passionate about the activity, you may miss the forest for the trees. If, however, you really need to buckle down and focus on making a new idea practical, high motivational intensity can be just the ticket.”*

CEOs may want to choose carefully, therefore, when they undertake strategic reviews and visionary thinking.

### Impact on behaviours?

High arousal is also designed to trigger the “fight, freeze, or flight” response in people. This will have an implication for the way that CEOs interact with their colleagues on the Board, in their executive team, and potentially throughout the organisation. This is illustrated by the following diagram, taken from a paper entitled “Doing What Feels Right: The Influence of CEO Character and Emotions on Top Management Team Dynamics” by Veronika Kisfalvi and Patricia Pitcher published in the Journal of Management Inquiry, Vol. 12 No. 1, March 2003 42-66.



**Figure 1: The influence of CEO character and emotions on top management team dynamics**

## Summary

A CEO needs to be more aware that their emotions are likely to have an impact on their decisions- although it is not yet clear quite what this may be.

Some research suggests that the high arousal, positive emotions typically felt by CEOs are likely to make them more willing to accept risk, more focused on results, and to spend a lot of time in a state of “fight”. These may, of course, be traits that are important for their role.

This state may also mean that when seeking to be creative, CEOs should find a way of moving into a lower arousal state or be supported by others with a more creative mindset.

The potential implications for the Board and their executive team are discussed further below.

### FOR THE BOARD

There are several potential implications for the governing body of the organisation, be that a Board of Directors or a Board of Trustees.

#### **Control and direction of the organisation**

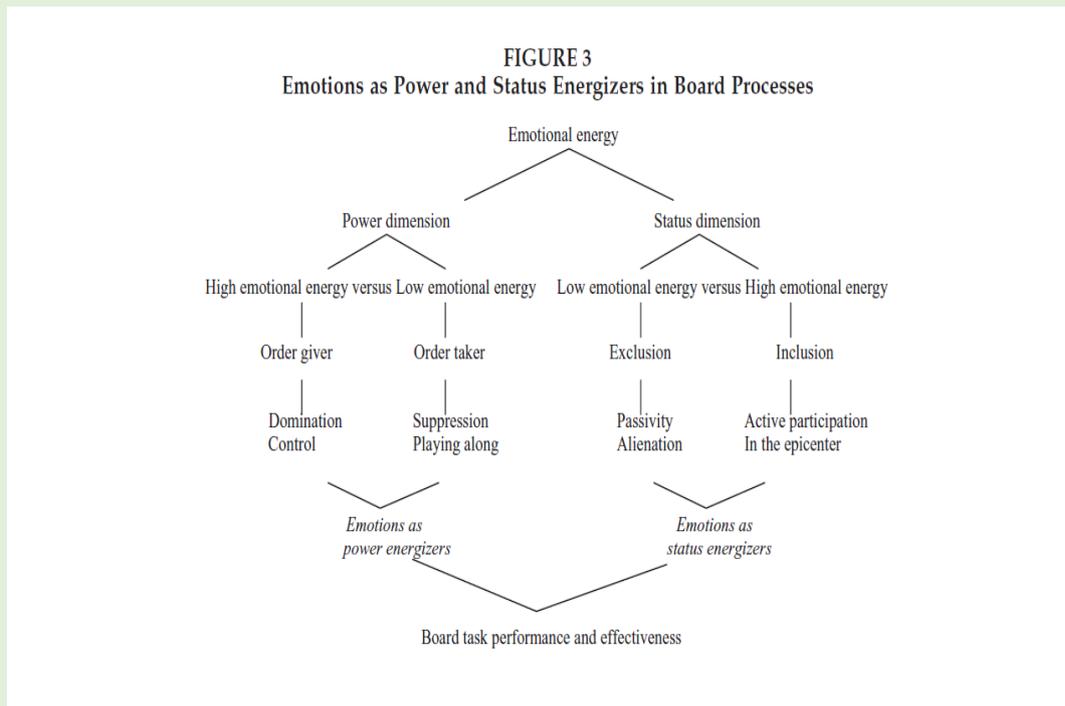
The Board will have appointed the CEO to be the senior executive director. The CEO is thus a key player in the execution of the Board’s responsibilities to control and direct the organisation and to achieve its sustainable long- term success. They need to recognise the impact on strategy and performance as shaped by the CEO’s character and emotions as illustrated in the diagram above.

Furthermore, they need to understand the impact of emotions across the whole Board. A study undertaken around 15 years ago, and published as “Beyond Facts and Figures: The Role of Emotions in Boardroom Dynamics” by Ethel Brundin and Mattias Nordqvist in the *Journal of Corporate Governance Volume 16 Number 4 July 2008*, concluded that, based on their studies,

“the board members who influence processes in the board are those whose emotional energies are built up and transformed as power and status energizers in line with board task expectations.

Being aware, and able to understand the subtle working of emotions in board processes are crucial for being an effective board member.”

They illustrated the concepts in the following diagram.



Based on my sample, CEOs would appear to run with high emotional energy.

### **Balance**

One of the requirements of good governance, as laid down in the UK corporate governance code, is to ensure that the Board contains a good balance of skills, knowledge, and experience. A balance of temperament will also be required to ensure the avoidance of group think. Group think has been defined in the past as “the destructive tendency to minimise conflict and maximise harmony and conformity” (Janis, 1972).

The challenge is to gain a balance without neutralising everyone, and without group think. Again, a challenge for the Chair.

Interestingly, according to an article in the Annual Review of Psychology in June 2014 by scholars (Lerner, Li, Vadesolo, Kassam), research on group level emotional processes is surprisingly scant, given that so many high-stakes decisions are made in groups and that the existing research reveals important effects.

### **Understanding CEO behaviour**

A Board needs to understand the factors that might be driving CEO behaviours- and recognise both the positives for the organisation of high arousal positive emotions, but also the difficulties that might generate when interacting with the CEO- whose emotional balance may mean they are combative as a default mode. This might lead to conflict with members of the Board, which effectively is a behavioural issue rather than reflecting significant disagreements or dislikes. This is an important Board management issue for the Chair.

### **Managing risk**

The Board also needs to understand that this surfeit of high arousal positive emotions may mean that the CEO underestimates risk and/or is keen for immediate solutions. Again, an important Board management issue for the Chair.

### **Strategic planning**

It may also mean that CEOs are most creative and visionary following holidays and rest, and Board planning around longer term matters should factor that in.

### **Retaining CEOs**

Changes in CEO emotions might lead to the CEO deciding to leave, or the Board wanting them to leave. Assuming the CEO normally performs as expected and required, then this is not a good outcome for the Board, and potentially leads to a cycle of CEO recruitment and rejection or departure.

It would seem important for the Board, and the executive team which supports the CEO, to work in such a way that avoids the CEO feeling lonely, under threat, unsupported, unadmired, and reducing their level of trust. At the same time, an appropriate level of performance review and scrutiny is required from the Board. Again, a difficult challenge for the Chair and the Board.

They will also want their chosen CEO to be able to perform as required over the long term. Physical or mental health issues can be a barrier to this. Mental health challenges for CEOs are covered in the next section.

### **Duty of care**

Furthermore, as with all employees, the organisation has a duty of care for the CEO's physical and mental health. They need to do their best to ensure that the CEO manages his or her emotions to avoid keeping their system under chronic stress. This is likely to include ensuring that the CEO has sufficient down time, holiday, and perhaps periodic sabbaticals. This will be covered in more detail in the next chapter.

### **THE EXECUTIVE TEAM**

The challenges faced by the Board are also faced by the executive team- daily. They too need to recognise and respond to the emotions in a manner which both supports the CEO, avoids group think and challenges the CEO, balances the CEO, retains the CEO's trust, maintaining relationships with a highly aroused individual, and which reflects a sub-ordinate position- which is not easy.

With CEO's appearing to be normally very trusting, then the role of sceptic and "scrutiniser in chief" in this team appears to be key.

Role definition, team formulation and teamwork at this level is key, to ensure not just a balance and full portfolio of skills, expertise, and experience, but also a balance of, and understanding of, character, emotion, and values.

The executive team also need to avoid chronic stress themselves- with the same potential consequences as highlighted for the CEO as set out below.



## IMPACT ON THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF THE CEO.

### **The implication of high arousal positive emotions**

The prevalence of high arousal, positive emotions can bring some significant potential personal consequences for CEOs in terms of their physical and mental health.

Research indicates that the medical profession believes that there appears to be physical and associated emotional side effects from experiencing high arousal emotions as a “default mode”. In simple terms, high arousal stresses the body and causes it to be flooded with high amounts of adrenaline and cortisol. Constant high alertness, whether for positive or negative reasons, causes chronic stress.

The physical consequences of chronic stress include

- irritability, which can be extreme
- fatigue
- headaches
- difficulty concentrating, or an inability to do so
- rapid, disorganized thoughts
- difficulty sleeping
- digestive problems
- changes in appetite
- feeling helpless
- a perceived loss of control
- low self-esteem
- loss of sexual desire
- nervousness
- frequent infections or illnesses

Chronic stress can also lead to mental health issues, as it can lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn can lead to burnout. Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when someone feels overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, the person affected begins to lose the interest and motivation that led them to take on a certain role in the first place. Eventually, they may feel like they have nothing more to give.

Burnout is not caused solely by stressful work or too many responsibilities. Other factors contribute to burnout, including lifestyle and personality traits. In fact, what someone does in their downtime and how they look at the world can play just as big a role in causing overwhelming stress as work or home demands.

Lifestyle causes which can exacerbate work related stress include

- Working too much, without enough time for socializing or relaxing.
- Lack of close, supportive relationships.
- Taking on too many responsibilities, without enough help from others.
- Not getting enough sleep

A high-achieving, Type A personality also exacerbates the situation, as can perfectionist tendencies.

The table below highlights the difference between stress and burnout. A lot of the positive, high arousal emotions can be seen in the stress column.

Stress	Burnout
Characterized by over-engagement.	Characterized by disengagement.
Emotions are overreactive.	Emotions are blunted.
Produces urgency and hyperactivity.	Produces helplessness and hopelessness.
Loss of energy.	Loss of motivation, ideals, and hope.
Leads to anxiety disorders.	Leads to detachment and depression.
Primary damage is physical.	Primary damage is emotional.
May kill you prematurely.	May make life seem not worth living.

This may mean that CEOs face a cycle, if they do not manage it, of high arousal positive emotions leading to tiredness then negative emotions, then emotional exhaustion and then burnout. They therefore need to try to balance their emotions.

### Balancing emotions

One model that suggests how a balance of emotions might be achieved is that of Gilbert (2010), which identifies three core systems, which each play an important role in regulating emotions. These are the **drive**, **threat** and **soothe** systems.

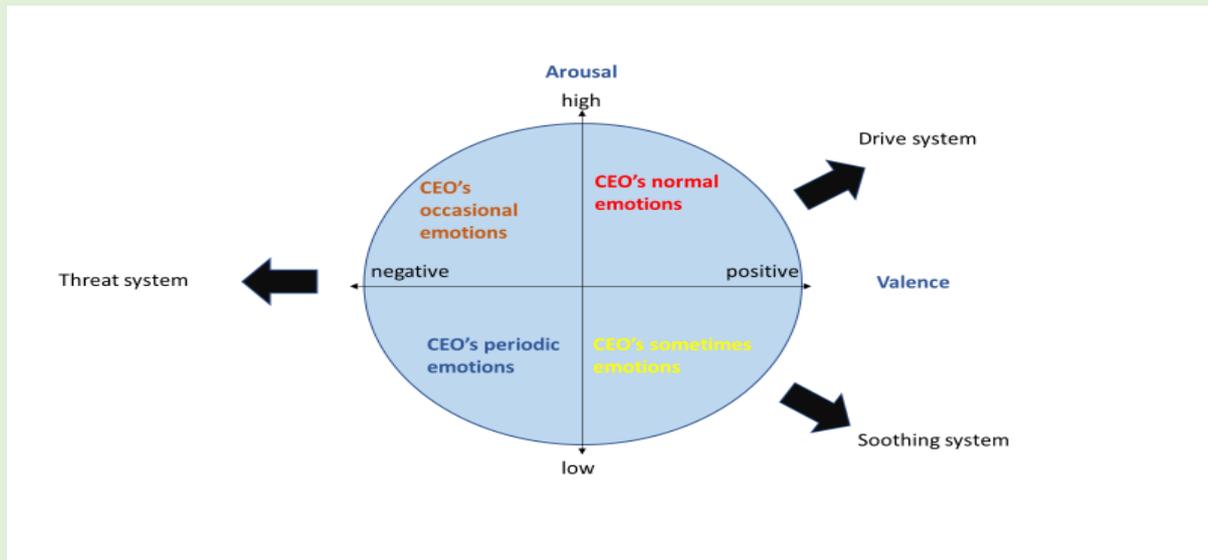
The drive system is what energises people to get things done and be active. It is clearly fundamental to CEOs. It is a system that can operate in overdrive in an environment that is highly competitive, and where goals continually need to be achieved. It is closely related to the threat system- and a failure to achieve the objectives of the drive system can lead to the threat system kicking in.

The threat system is aimed at avoiding threats to survival. They lead to emotional responses such as anxiety or anger- which are aimed at motivating the individual to protect themselves. Actual or potential events, activities, or comments that are risks to a person's reputation, social status, relationships, career, finances, health, future or happiness are a threat.

The soothe system is quite different and has a calming influence on both the threat and drive systems. The soothe system is at work when people are relaxed, feeling safe, calm, and content.

The model states that people cannot be in threat and soothe mode at the same time, and you cannot be in drive and soothe mood at the same time.

These systems would appear to related to emotions as follows.



To avoid overstressing the drive system and moving to the threat system, and/ or allowing real or perceived threats to drive the threat system, balance can be achieved by utilising the soothe system.

This would suggest that CEOs might need to find ways to relax and be calm that do not involve high arousal emotions. Failure to do so is likely to lead to tiredness, an overstressed system and potentially burnout.

### Theory of Well Being

Martin Seligman, the leading “positive psychologist” has developed a theory of “Well-Being” \*. This theory suggests that the human feeling of “well-being” reflects the following five elements.

- **Positive emotion** (Of which happiness and life satisfaction are all aspects)
- **Engagement**
- **Relationships**
- **Meaning and purpose**
- **Accomplishment**

\* “*Flourish. A new understanding of happiness and wellbeing: The Practical Guide to using positive psychology to make you happier and healthier*”, Martin Seligman, Nicholas Brearley Publishing, 2011.

This would suggest that the high positive emotions, level of engagement, and, for successful CEOs, accomplishment, particularly in an environment where they have strong relationships and feel there is meaning and purpose to their organisation and role, can lead to a strong sense of well-being.

## HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT CEOS AND BOARDS?

The positive, high arousal emotions that the survey suggests are normally felt by CEOs, coupled with/associated with Type A personalities, may be key elements of CEO success. They are also likely to be integral to the effective, or otherwise, functioning of the Board, the executive leadership team and corporate governance in general.

They would also appear core to mental and physical health issues that CEOs might suffer from- to the detriment of both the individual, their families and to the organisation which they lead, but which can also lead to a great sense of “well-being”.

### WHAT MIGHT BE DONE TO BETTER SUPPORT CEOS AND BOARDS ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

The topic of CEO and Board emotions is an area that has not been researched in depth, or if it has the findings are not readily available or widely shared.

Assuming its accepted that the emotions experienced by CEO’s, Board Members, and the senior executive team are likely to be, amongst a myriad of other factors, an important contributor to sustainable organisational success, robust decision making and good governance, then such a study is surely merited- and is probably the province of a leading business school.

Such a study might be expected to

- Increase the understanding of the potential consequences of CEO and Board emotions
- Raise the awareness of the potential impact of such
- Develop tools and processes to enhance monitoring of emotions and management of the situations arising

Some specific shorter- term initiatives based on these preliminary findings might include

- Increasing the awareness of CEOs and potential CEOs of the health consequences of high arousal emotions and how these can lead to chronic stress. Most people, myself included until I did this research, assume stress is based on negative situations, threats, and adversity- not an over- abundance of positivity and “can do, will do”.
- Ensuring CEOs have sufficient emotional “soothing time”- which might include
  - Strongly discouraging 24/7, 365 working patterns and expectations
  - Ensuring all holiday is taken and in sufficient chunks of time
  - short sabbaticals- voluntary or encouraged by the Board
- Enhanced, relatively immediate, feedback on emotions being exhibited and ongoing measurement of the effectiveness of working relationships
- Providing regular positive affirmation that the CEO is valued (that is nothing to do with pay).

To avoid CEOs feeling lonely consideration might be given to

- Providing CEOs with an independent, confidential coach/mentor/counsellor (which would also tie in with the management of emotions and ensuring enough “soothing time”)

- Ensuring that Board Directors understand their collective responsibility for the direction and control, compliance, performance, and sustainability of the organisation so it does not feel to the CEO, or the organisation, other stakeholders, and the outside world that it all sits with the CEO.
- (Re)frame the role as it originally evolved- the general manager of the executive team. In many organisations the CEO used to be known as the Managing Director.

## APPENDIX- THE LIST OF EMOTIONS USED.

- Admiration for others
- Admired (others feeling for you)
- Amusement
- Anger
- Annoyance
- Bored
- Competitive
- Confidence
- Courage
- Disappointment
- Dissatisfaction
- Distrustful
- Doubt
- Embarrassment
- Empathy
- Energised
- Frustration
- Hope
- Insecure
- Inspiration
- Interest
- Joy
- Kind
- Lonely
- Optimism
- Pride
- Regretful
- Relaxed
- Reluctant
- Respected
- Respectful
- Sad
- Successful
- Sympathetic
- Tired
- Worried



<http://www.knowprogress.co.uk>

LET US HELP YOU KNOW PROGRESS

